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CONTENTS

September 2005 Issue #254

89
18
44
20

■ COVER STORY

AGE OF EMPIRES III

We've got an exclusive hands-on with the next chapter in Ensemble Studios' blockbuster *Age of Empires* series—plus, a look at some action-oriented RTS games that might give it a run for its money.

8 Editorial

Each month, Jeff makes us wonder...about what the editorial is going to say, since it gets written after the Table of Contents. How does he do it?

10 Letters

You guys are so cute when you type all angry at us.

14 Radar

Check out our expose on the upcoming slew of Marvel games, an in-depth look at *Prey*, and the latest and greatest technology from Creative Labs.

57 Reviews

This month, we've got the final word on *Battlefield 2*, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, and the digital nightmare that is *Dungeon Lords*, among others.

58 Battlefield 2
62 Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas
64 Stronghold 2
66 FlatOut
66 TrackMania Sunrise
67 Fantastic 4
68 Fate
69 Dungeon Lords
70 Pariah
71 Area 51
72 Imperial Glory
72 Tin Soldiers: Julius Ceasar

GAME INDEX

44	Age of Empires III
71	Area 51
58	Battlefield 2
54	Battlestations: Midway
34	Call of Duty 2
69	Dungeon Lords
14, 67	Fantastic 4
68	Fate
66	FlatOut
54	Ghost Wars
36	Gods & Heroes: Rome Rising
62	Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas
86	Guild Wars
72	Imperial Glory
70	Pariah
30	Prey
54	Rise & Fall: Civilizations at War
64	Stronghold 2
72	Tin Soldiers: Julius Caesar
20	Tomb Raider: Legend
66	TrackMania Sunrise
16	Ultimate Spider-Man
22	Unreal Tournament 2007
27	Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War—Winter Assault
26	Warhammer Online
27	Warhammer RTS (working title)
17	X-Men Legends II: Rise of Apocalypse

76 Tech

Oooo, baby! We're kinda sweet on Vicious PC's newest desktop system. Plus, we engineer a throwdown between AMD's and Intel's latest SLI cards, scope some storage options, and take Gateway and Vicious PC laptops for a spin.

86 Tom vs. Bruce

Tom and Bruce team up to tackle the harsh world of *Guild Wars*.

90 Scorched Earth

All we need now is an Everybody Loves Raymond game.

THIS MONTH ON 1UP.COM

EXXY.1UP.COM

In this action-packed editor blog, *CGW* contributor and 1UP.com editorial intern Patrick Klepek expounds on *Battlefield 2*, Harry Potter, and his own impossibly huge afro.

DEATH.1UP.COM

If you haven't jumped on the *Guild Wars* bandwagon yet, check out this weekly travelogue by James Mielke and Kimi Matsuzaki to see just what you're missing!

PCGIVEAWAY.1UP.COM

Want to win a 1UP.com-branded Falcon Northwest Fragbox PC? Check out this contest, which runs throughout the entire month of August!

EDITORIAL 254

TURN THE PAGE

Kids, please don't try this at home

THERE IS A RESTAURANT IN BERKELEY, CA—Fat Apple's—that I think of whenever I'm grappling with some kind of major change at this magazine, because after a lifetime of therapy and hallucinogens and Dr. Phil self-help tapes, I've learned one thing about myself: I hate change. Which is why I've ordered the exact same thing at Fat Apple's every time I've gone there in the last 25 years. Cheeseburger. Medium rare. Grated longhorn cheese. I don't care that the restaurant is constantly adding new items. I don't care that it drives my wife and kid crazy. I like what I like. Why change when I'm happy already?

So I understand how longtime *CGW* readers may feel as they browse through this issue, which debuts an entirely new look for us. Art director Michael Jennings has been working day and night—literally—to bring this new design to fruition, so I sincerely hope you like it. The goal was not to start over from scratch, but to make each issue more vibrant, more readable, and more engaging on a page-to-page basis. Did we succeed? Do you wish you had your regular cheeseburger back? Let us know at cgwletters@ziffdavis.com.

And there's even more change: My compadre Robert Coffey, the last of the "old guard" editors (along with myself) hired by legendary EIC Johnny Wilson, has departed to pursue further writing opportunities. Fear not, though, Coffeyheads: He will continue to grace (or soil) these pages with the acerbic wit and no-BS commentary that have made him one of the best writers this industry has ever seen. Good luck, Robert. We miss you. But please don't come back and kill us.

JEFF GREEN EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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Voted: Most likely to be elected first woman president or to stage a coup d'état after losing the election. Viva la revolución!

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kristenss.1UP.com
Now Playing: Age of Empires II, Battlefield 2

ROBERT COFFEY
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Voted: Mostly likely to fake Tourette's in order to swear freely in class

1UP.com Blog:
citizenpain.1UP.com
Now Playing: World of WarCraft (still)

DARREN GLADSTONE
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Voted: Most likely to compensate by working out...or to just go postal

1UP.com Blog:
cgwenzmo.1UP.com
Now Playing: Guild Wars, Battlefield 2

RYAN SCOTT
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Voted: Most likely not to have a girlfriend until college...high school chicks are stupid anyway

1UP.com Blog:
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Now Playing: Guild Wars, Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War

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Now Playing: Psychonauts, Brothers in Arms

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LETTERS

ISSUE 254

BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE LETTERS C, G, AND W

MISSING DVDS: CASE SOLVED!

I have a confession to make. I am a freaky comic-book fan (there are boxes upon boxes of comics in my closet in acid-free plastic) who's so fascinated with *City of Heroes* that I read any and all articles I can find [about the game]. So imagine my delight when I heard that the July/August issue of *CGW* covered *City of Villains* and came with a trial of the game on DVD! Oh my God—I almost s*** my pants! But when I got my issue...no disc! Where's my disc?

Amy-Lee Beebe

To all the Amy-Lees who've written in—and damn if there aren't a lot of you—allow us to explain: There are two *CGW* subscription plans available. One includes a disc each month, and one does not. Which plan you have depends mostly on how you subscribed to begin with. But all is not lost! If you want to receive the disc from now on, simply call 1-800-827-4450, and the nice customer service person who answers will help you upgrade your current subscription and get you set up to receive the disc forevermore. Considering some of the amazing stuff that shows up on our discs—such as the *World of WarCraft* and *Battlefield 2* demos this month—we think it's totally worth it.

MORE BAD APPLES TO WATCH OUT FOR

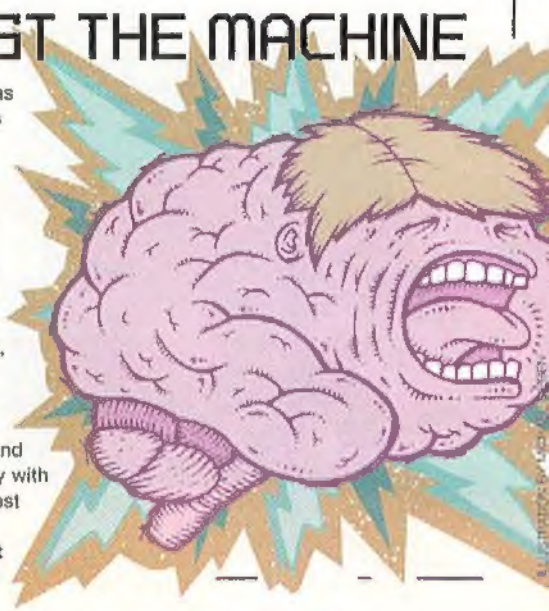
Just wanted to drop you a note about the article on MMO farming ("Wage Slaves") in your July/August issue. It was excellent and worthy of a newsmagazine. However, you needed to include information on the "infiltrator" farmer. These are the ones who join the more powerful guilds and go for higher-level stuff during raids. We recently noticed a level 60 paladin who was online 24/7. At first we accepted the explanation that his brother and sister played [as the same character], too, but we started to keep an eye on where he was, and it was always in areas notorious for farming. He would go on raids with us and "accidentally" loot elite items and then say, "Sorry, my accident." Unfortunately, he was having these "accidents" once a raid. When we issued a warning, he pretended to have trouble understanding us. During our next raid, he ninja-looted the first elite drop. We told him if he did that once more, he was out. An elite item dropped with the very next boss, and he ninja-looted again. We booted him from the guild. Afterward, we figured out that he had managed to loot probably close to 1,000 gold worth of items with his "mistakes." This type of farmer does more harm to the game than the others because they ruin the reputation of the guild they infiltrate.

Paul M. Rocconi, MD

RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE

I have a confession to make. As much as I enjoy your magazine's detailed articles and in-depth reviews, I have to say that the things that get me to renew my subscription are the reviews of bad games—or rather, when YOU have to play god-awful games. I don't know why, but when I read about Robert Coffey losing brain cells while playing *James Bond 007: NightFire*, I couldn't help but smile. I'm not a sadist, but reading about your horrible mental trauma at the hands of coaster-worthy games just lightens up my day. So thank you for your selfless martyrdom and please continue to torture Robert Coffey with mindless, broken games. He is at his best when his brain is screaming.

John Elliott



WHY, HELLOOOO, LADIES...

I am responding to Robert Coffey's ludicrous claim that 15 percent of *CGW*'s readers are women. I am living proof that those figures are flawed. Every month, when your rag comes in, I hold it under my arm [and] into the restroom it goes. Yes, it stays in the restroom for the remainder of the month as my choice of reading material for those moments of quiet solitude and philosophical enlightenment. When my wife sees the new installment on top of the commode, she puts on a hazmat suit and accordingly disposes of the previous issue. This is the same person who, given the choice between drinking a glass of arsenic or reading your magazine, would opt for the former.

Ramon Hermida

Managing editor Kristen Salvatore responds: Ramon, despite the deep and scientific means by which you have collected your statistics, as opposed to the fly-by-night efforts of our corporate research department, one has to wonder whether the toxic fumes apparently emanating from your bathroom (after apparently emanating from, uh, somewhere else) are possibly clouding your mathematical judgment. Certainly, *CGW*—much like drinking arsenic—is not for everyone. But if we're going on anecdotal evidence, I'm going to see your (obviously blessedly patient) wife and raise you myself, two other managing editors, two 1UP.com staff members, the entire PMS clan, and my mother, all of whom are regular subscribers to *CGW* and/or various other gaming publications. Frag on, my sisters—frag on. /

SAY IT LOUD, SAY IT PROUD!

Confession is good for the soul. And while we may harbor some doubts as to whether our readers actually have such a thing as a soul, we encourage you to get whatever is bothering or pleasing you off your chest by writing to cgwletters@ziffdavis.com. You'll be glad you did.

MAIL BYTES

I have two big problems: I'm from Canada, and I'm French!
—Gipsi

I've never written [in] before, but I just wanted to tell you all that you're losers...in a good way.
—Steven Scott

I can think of a better name for a female troll...how about Darren Gladstone?
—PotatoChipLady

Please don't review anything good for the next few years...I can't get any more broke than I am!
—Chris Mayo

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COMIC RELIEF

Marvel's ultimate PC-gaming lineup...we hope

THIS TIME LAST YEAR, THE WOOL—OR more accurately Spidey's mask—was pulled over our eyes when Activision released a *Spider-Man 2* game for consoles and the PC. The console version is a *GTA*-like experience that allows for free-roaming crime busting throughout Manhattan. The PC version, however, is a totally different—and far, far worse—game, without any warning on the box that it is not the same as the console game. Picture George Wendt in *Spider-Man* Underoos and you have the PC game. It was a classic, inexplicable case of bait and switch. We called them on it.

So you'll understand our initial skepticism when we heard that Activision's 2005 lineup of Marvel superhero games is coming to the PC. Activision claims to have listened to the complaints of PC gamers. One Activision staffer (who asked to remain anonymous) confesses, "We learned our lesson last year with *Spider-Man 2* [on the PC], and we aren't going to do *that* again!"

Will these games make the PC jump without any earth-shattering catastrophes? We've seen *Ultimate Spider-Man* and *X-Men Legends II: Rise of Apocalypse* in action—check out what we think so far on the following pages. And for even more details on *Fantastic 4*, read our review on page 67. **Darren Gladstone**

FANTASTIC 4

REED RICHARDS is Mr. Fantastic
POWERS: He's the superstretchy, superfreakin' brainiac of the group.
IN GAME: Reed can stretch to punch from afar, squeeze into tight spaces, and hack in a puzzle minigame.

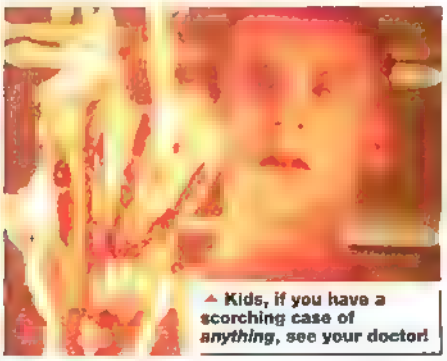
SUE STORM is the Invisible Woman
POWERS: She's all about stealth. She can turn invisible...hence the clever name.
IN GAME: Thanks to her telekinesis, she can also create force fields.

BEN GRIMM is the Thing
POWERS: He's got superstrength and a soft side—somewhere.
IN GAME: He's a big pile of orange rocks that shouts, "It's clobberin' time!" You do the math.

JOHNNY STORM is the Human Torch
POWERS: He has the power of flight, flame attacks, and cheesy acting—and the ability to set off smoke detectors.
IN GAME: What you'd pretty much expect—flies and fries the bad guys.

REVIEWED ON PAGE 67

WE'VE SEEN JESSICA Alba's disappearing act and Michael Chiklis' big rubber rock suit in Marvel's big-screen adaptation of *Fantastic 4*, but we were *really* nervous when the topic of a day-and-date release of the game and movie was mentioned. After all, weren't these the exact same circumstances under which



▲ Kids, if you have a scorching case of *anything*, see your doctor!

>> Think Marvel has the superhero market cornered? Think again, because DC Comics and Sony Online Entertainment are teaming up. Our shady spies

IS IT LIKE THE MOVIE? (GULP)

The *Fantastic Four* game's scribe, Zak Penn, says he wants to stay true to the movie and the comic. Will he succeed? Read the review!

Spider-Man 2 launched last summer, when PC gamers were left with utter gaming garbage? Enter Beenox Studios.

The Quebec City-based developer has done a fanastic job of bringing console games to the PC (uh, no pun intended—seriously). Last year's *Tony Hawk's Underground 2*, which earned an Editor's Choice award from this very publication, particularly comes to mind as an example of Beenox's notable handiwork.

Is it any wonder, then, that the fledgling development house has been tapped by Activision to bring another immaculate port to the PC? And, in an even more interesting recent turn of events, Activision acquired Beenox Studios to likely handle all PC ports going forward.

Beenox may have wrapped up *Fantastic 4*, but there are lots of other titles following in its stead. In fact, there are two other super-powered ports we can think of off the top of our heads—both of which are previewed on the following pages.

As for *F4*, which loosely follows the movie and includes a bevy of classic *FF* villains like Mole Man, just flip forward to the review on page 67 for our official take on this story-driven bash-em-up title. /

INSIDE

NEW SCREENS

UT 2007

We've managed to score some rockin' new screens and details about the next installment of *Unreal Tournament*.

22

JUST IN

Warhammer

The *Warhammer* franchise explodes with two ambitious new projecs and an expansion to last year's *Dawn of War*.

26

UPDATE

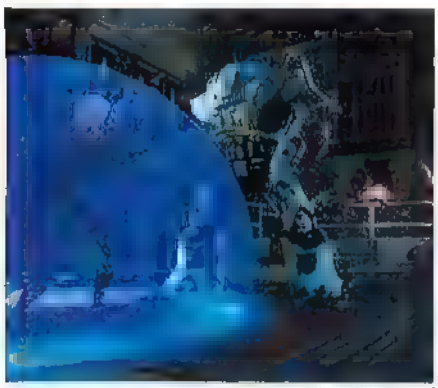
Eggbert

...is vacationing in the Hinterlands, but his comely companion Crepesuzette is "filling" in. Get it? Ha!

28

>> Beenox has done a fantastic job of bringing console games to the PC.

▼ The Thing is about to rock someone's world with his supermove. Rock...get it?



▲ Sue Storm epitomizes the phrase "you can look, but not touch."

▲ There's no "F" in team, but you still need to be able to juggle all the characters' abilities.

▲ While battling Mole Man, Invisible Woman and The Human Torch can protect each other.

already leaked info about the ambitious efforts planned for a massive MMO. Mum's the word for now, but you'll get the scoop here! Check back soon! >>

ULTIMATE SPIDER-MAN

IN THE COMIC CONTINUUM

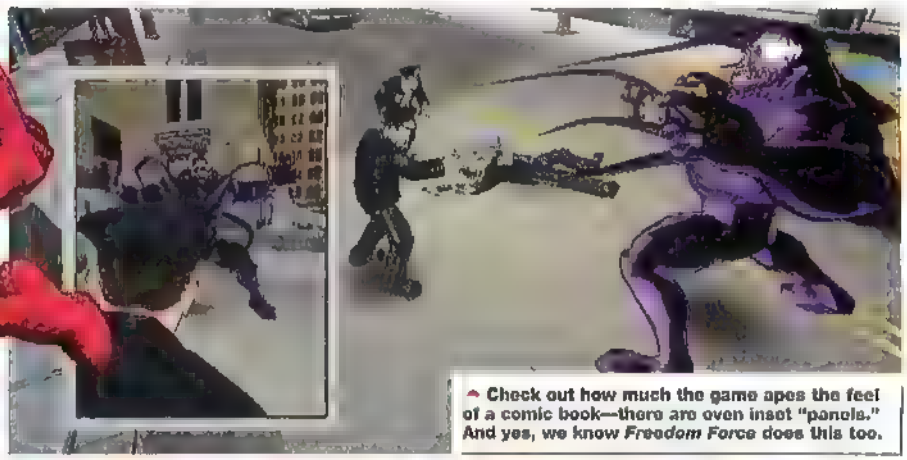
The story picks up where *Ultimate Spider-Man* #30 left off: Eddie Brock, Peter's childhood friend, has become Venom! This game reveals Venom's Ultimate universe origins as he's pursued by the feds...and others.

FIRST LOOK

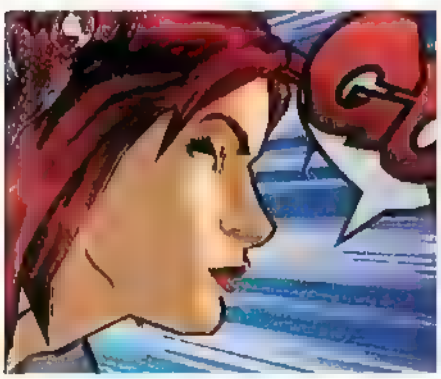
BEENOX IS ALSO HARD AT WORK BRINGING *Ultimate Spider-Man* to the PC, and spokespeople have done everything in their power to assure us that the PC-gaming crowd won't get screwed by some half-baked version of the ol' webhead's game this time around.

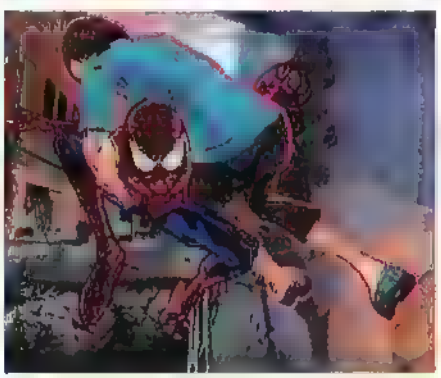
What makes this game so cool? First, it takes the Manhattan environment from *Spider-Man 2* (the console version, that is) and adds the borough of Queens, where Peter Parker grew up. You have free reign to swing around the city at your leisure or advance the story line written by Marvel scribe Brian Michael Bendis (see what Bendis has to say on the facing page). Everything is presented in an extremely authentic comic-book style, thanks to expertly animated cut-scenes that bring the game to life in much the same way the recent live-action adaptation of *Sin City* does for that comic. There are even a few in-game pop-up panels and splitscreen moments that further convey the comic-book feel.

You also get the opportunity to play as Spidey's archnemesis, Venom. As you navigate the detailed and destructible city streets of New York, you'll discover that the characters play quite differently—after all, Venom is a huge beast that consumes people to survive. A large variety of missions and side quests will take you all over the Big Apple as you bust crime and save lives. There are even a few minigames that require split-second decisions: Do you rescue the kid from falling debris or yank the fiery car blocking a subway entrance? Timing is everything.



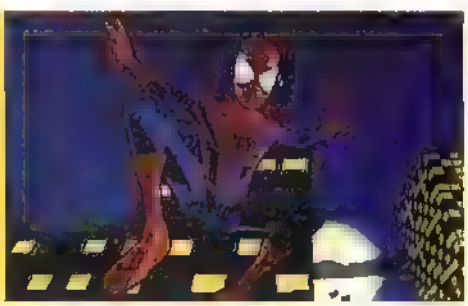
Check out how much the game apes the feel of a comic book—there are even inset "panels." And yes, we know *Freedom Force* does this too.





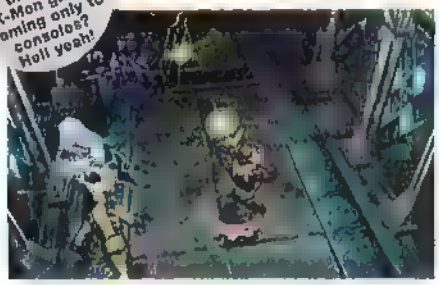
This is how Spider-Man looks in most games: "realistically" drawn in 3D, and with the frame of a strong, young man, as he's portrayed in the movies.

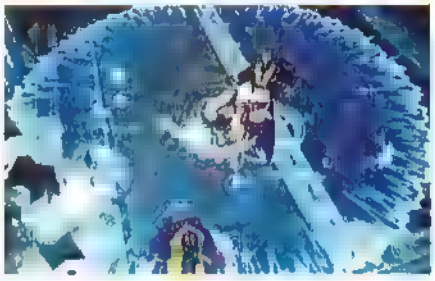
Now, check out what's being done for *Ultimate Spider-Man*: The semi-cel-shaded 3D comic-inking art style looks exactly as it does in the comics. Spidey may look a little wiry, but in the Ultimate Marvel universe, Parker is 15 years old, dating Mary Jane Watson, and working part-time on *The Daily Bugle*'s website. Hooray for contemporizing!



>> Not so long ago, Warner Bros. proclaimed it would impose stiff fines on games based on WB properties that averaged less than

X-Treme Prejudice
Were we pissed by the original X-Men game coming only to consoles? Hell yeah!





X-MEN LEGENDS II: RISE OF APOCALYPSE

FIRST LOOK

THE ORIGINAL *X-MEN LEGENDS*, DEVELOPED by Raven Software, turned out to be one of the best action-RPGs of 2004. The sting: It was released only for consoles. Thanks a lot, guys! A year later, the sequel is coming to where it belongs: PCs, the home of comic nerds!

The whole promise of *X-Men Legends*—controlling four different cel-shaded mutants at once—is what made it so attractive to gamers the first time around. Want to be Wolverine for a sec? Just switch over to him and then back to Colossus again when the time is right. The A.I. intelligently manages the rest of your squad while you're busting heads, making for a sophisticated and user-friendly game. And for the PC-bound sequel, you'll have access to 16 different muties from both the X-Men and the evil Brotherhood of Mutants.

The huge, destructible environments will provide puzzles and multiple ways to progress the story, but the real "just one more mission" addictiveness comes from the progression system. As you earn experience, you earn more powers; you're free to choose how you want to distribute your abilities, and the mutants you customize really play and feel different. Raven has added a massive number of new powers for each character (although there's not yet an exact number), and it's all easily accessible without having to dig through a tedious menu screen.

The one thing that hasn't been worked out yet is how multiplayer will work. In the original game, a friend can plug in a second controller to join in at any time. The new version promises online co-op as well—which is especially handy for the PC kids who don't want to throw a LAN party just to play *X-Men Legends II*. But there's no exact word on how it'll work for the PC just yet.

There's a lot on the line here for PC gamers. And come this fall, we're either going to be really happy and knee-deep in nerddom or see a lot of angry comic blogs online. Then again, after *Elektra*, there's nowhere to go but up, right?

A FEW QUICK WORDS WITH BRIAN MICHAEL BENDIS

BRIAN MICHAEL BENDIS IS ONE OF THE MOST prolific writers in comicdom today. He's penned a number of critically acclaimed crime and espionage graphic novels, the superheroic police series *Powers*, and the detective series *Alias* (no relation to the TV show). He's also revitalized a number of Marvel characters, including Spider-Man in the *Ultimate Spider-Man* series, which is the basis for Activision's new game.

CGW: Who would you say is your favorite character you've written about?

Bendis: Wow. That's like Sophie's choice. I couldn't possibly choose. But my all-time faves were Spidey and Daredevil, so I am blessed.

CGW: Is there a comic-book character you've wanted a chance to bring back but haven't yet?

Bendis: Yeah, there's a long laundry list. The new one is *Ultimate Moon Knight*, [which features Moon Knight], who is showing up in *Ultimate Spider-Man*. That was a big one for us, to kind of show Moon Knight in a new light and, you know, show him off a little bit.

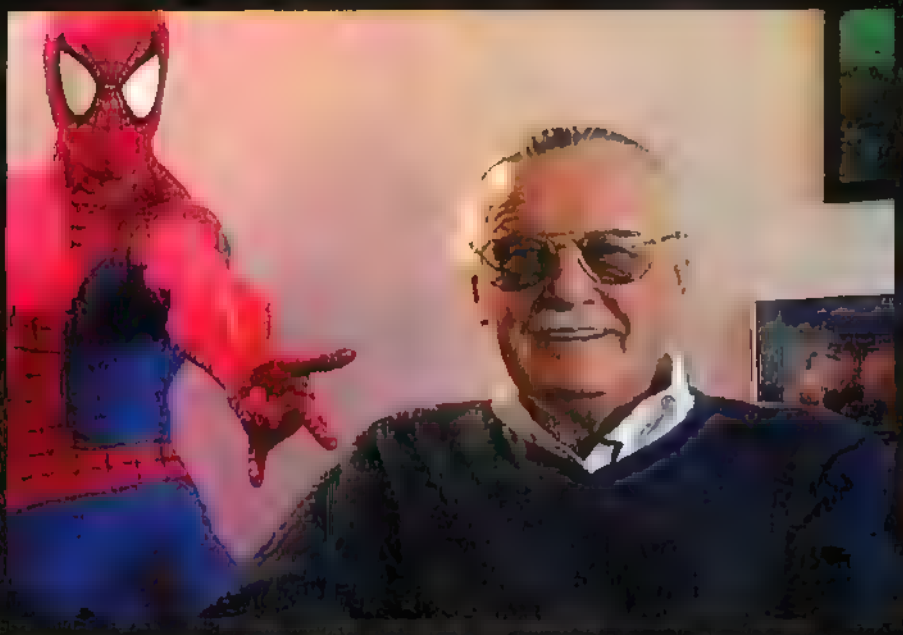
CGW: Can you talk about the process of working on the story for the *Ultimate Spider-Man* game? How does it feel going from a comic book to an interactive medium?

Bendis: It was like college for me...and it was just a great time for me as a writer, because you have this certain thing [with] a comic book, no matter what you do. It's 22 pages and there's a format that you follow. Then all of a sudden here's this challenge: to write the same characters in an entirely different medium, an entirely different format, with the reader being the director, if you know what I mean. So really, not only was it exciting to write that, it actually altered the way I was approaching the comic as well.

CGW: And we understand that the story you're writing carries over directly from the comics.

Bendis: Yeah, it's Ultimate continuity, top to bottom. And it's just another *Ultimate Spider-Man* story, but this story [answers] a lot of the questions people keep asking us online. What happened to Venom? Stuff like that. And the game is the only place you'll see it. Unfortunately, I'm not allowed to talk any more about that for now!

70 percent on gamerankings.com. At last count *Matrix Online* scored 68.4 percent. No word yet on when those royalty checks will roll in. >>



SIMPLY MARVEL-OUS

Five questions for Stan Lee, the man behind the marvels

STAN LEE IS A LIVING LEGEND, A COMIC-BOOK genius who helped create some of the most well-known comic-book franchises to date: *The Amazing Spider-Man, The Incredible Hulk, The Fantastic Four,* and *The Uncanny X-Men.* So, what exactly happens when you stick him in a room with a bunch of slobbering comic nerds and game editors? Glad you asked...

QUESTION 1: Do you keep an active interest or any control over the different mediums that feature your creations, like films and games?

Lee: Do I want control? No, I don't want control at all. Let me tell you how cagey I am. If the movie is good, or the game or the TV show or the cartoon, I somehow get a lot of credit for it. [*Laughter*] If it's bad, hey, I had nothing to do with it!

QUESTION 2: What, in general, do you think of games being made out of comic-book characters? How would you compare the two?

Lee: Videogames are an art form and a form of entertainment. But compared to a comic book, a videogame is really much more exciting, and it makes the person who would be the comic-book reader, it makes him or her a participant, and in a way it's more exciting and more fun. When you read a comic book, you're reading the story, and it's taking place [in the book]. When you're playing a videogame, you're part of the story, so to me that really has the edge.

Now, I have not questioned everybody who reads comic books, but I would just guess if you're a comic-book reader, you would love to play the videogames because you're familiar with the characters. You care about the characters or else you wouldn't be a reader of the comics. And here you have a chance to move them and control them and guide them and have fights [with them] and so forth. It just seems to me to be a natural that the readers would be very enthusiastic about the games.

QUESTION 3: Is this a way to attract new people who haven't bought comic books before?

Lee: Would it attract new people who hadn't bought the comic book? It certainly can't hurt. I mean, somebody might buy the game who hadn't read the comics and say, "Hey, I gotta see more about Spider-Man; I gotta learn more about him. I love this guy." Sure. Everything helps everything else. I'm sure the comic books help the games, the games help the comic books, the movies help the games and the comic books, the comic books help the movies and the games...and if you don't interrupt me, I'll keep going.

As a matter of fact, since videogames have been in existence, comic-book sales have risen.

QUESTION 4: Comic books were once blamed for basically turning children into monsters. Now, it's videogames' turn. Thoughts?

Lee: There's always going to be somebody who feels that all the ills of the world are blamed on the movies we see, the games we play, the books we read. The comic industry survived Dr. Frederic Wertham [an outspoken anti-comics activist during the 1950s]. I used to actually debate with him. I knew him. And he'd say things like, "I did a study and I found that 95 percent of the young people in reform schools read comics." And I would say, "Well, 100 percent of them drink milk." I mean, the man was just unscientific, and he just—I don't know what his motive was, but these videogames, kids love 'em. I don't want to comment on the ones that may seem to be too violent, or...I don't know what is too violent and what isn't. I just know that kids [have] a lot of their own natural energy. [Playing videogames is] a way to expend it. It's a way to have a lot of fun. It excites them; they enjoy it. And to me, these games are great.

QUESTION 5: Which Marvel superhero would you most like to see in a videogame next?

Lee: That's a good question. Which would I like to see in a videogame next? Gee, there are so many of them. I think Iron Man would be good. I think the Silver Surfer would be great. And for something really different...maybe Dr. Strange, because he goes into different dimensions and so forth. You know, the funny thing is, I think you could make a good videogame out of almost anything, as long as you have an interesting good guy and a powerful bad guy and you could just find a way to get the great visuals and all the action. I can't think of any Marvel character, really, that I don't think would make for a good one. Certainly Ghost Rider would be good. The longer I sit here, the more of them I'll mention.

Want to know more about Stan Lee and other comic greats? Check out the documentary Countdown to Wednesday at www.countdowntowednesday.com.

"There's always going to be somebody who feels all the ills of the world can be blamed on the games we play..."

Marc Ecko's Gettin' Up: Contents Under Pressure, the hip-hop platforming graffiti game, is PC-bound. WORD UP for The Fresh Prince of Persia!

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LARA CROFT LIVES ON

Tomb Raider: Legend might not suck

PUBLISHER: **Eidos** DEVELOPER: **Crystal Dynamics** GENRE: **Action** RELEASE DATE: **November 2005**

PREVIEW

IT'S AN UNDERSTATEMENT TO SAY THAT *Tomb Raider: Legend* has had a tumultuous existence thus far. With a new design team, a desperate publisher, and thousands of jaded fans, *Legend* has a lot of work to do if it's going to impress anyone. Can Lara Croft still wow the few fans she has left in the wake of the unmitigated critical flop that was *Tomb Raider: The Angel of Darkness*? After what we've seen of Legend, our answer is a pleased—but reserved—yes.

The design team over at Crystal Dynamics (best known to PC gamers for the recent *Project: Snowblind*) appears to have risen to the occasion, taking the series back to its dungeon-delving roots while updating *Tomb Raider*'s look and feel to take full advantage of the latest-generation PC hardware. The game is now fully rendered using Havok physics, and—as we showed you in our June issue—Lara herself is cuter, softer, and more realistic than before. Her movements are much more agile and fluid this time around, thanks in part to an overhauled control system that looks to provide a considerable change of pace from the clunky mess found in *Angel of Darkness*.

LARA CROFT 2.0

But make no mistake: Crystal Dynamics isn't out to "fix" anything here. *Legend* has nothing to do with *Angel of Darkness*; it's a completely new product built from the ground up and designed with the series' classic gameplay in mind. As associate brand manager Mike Schmitt puts it, "[We took] some time off after the release of *Angel of Darkness* and essentially [did] a brand audit—we've made a conscious attempt to get back to some of the things that made the first game so special." Of course, this means some good old-fashioned acrobatics, high-tech gadgets, and dual-pistol firefights, but there's more to *Legend* than gunplay and hot pants.

Central to the game's design is the incorporation of new puzzle elements into the action. Crystal Dynamics is trying to move away from the "find the key and throw the switch" puzzles found in previous *Tomb Raider* games, instead focusing on environment-oriented challenges with multiple solutions. For example, while searching for a hidden passageway, Lara might be able to kick over a statue to uncover the entrance or perhaps blow the passageway open with a gun emplacement or a grenade. We're assured that a lot of effort has gone into making fun, exciting puzzles with minimal frustration.

THE PLOT THICKENS

With both new and classic elements in place, what direction can the series possibly take to tell a good story that isn't just another by-the-numbers artifact-hunting plot? Unfortunately, Eidos still has its lips sealed about story specifics. "We're not giving too much away yet," remarks Schmitt. "Lara will encounter a nemesis long thought dead as the [game] unfolds. Let's just say we'll learn a lot more about Lara's past...and what makes her tick." **Ryan Scott**

FALLING FROM GRACE

A timeline of Lara's exploits

"Just when you thought 3D games were connected to your gag reflex...*Tomb Raider* makes it all feel fresh and new again." –*CGW* #152

"They've made enough changes to make it interesting, but if you didn't like the first game, this won't make you change your mind." –*CGW* #164

"For those who can dig it, *Tomb Raider III* is by far the biggest and baddest of the series." –*CGW* #178

"Gameplay hasn't changed. You're still doing the same running-jumping-climbing-swimming moves, but with a few new additions." –*CGW* #186

"The hours spent repeating levels prove that the designers [illegible] more to offer." –*CGW* #200

"And thus gaming's highest-profile franchise [illegible] ground and kicked repeatedly in the head." –*CGW* #231

REGULAR

THE GOOD, THE BAD & THE UGLY SEPTEMBER 2005

THE GOOD

WORLD OF [illegible]

[illegible]

THE BAD

CITY OF HEROES PATCH WOES

[illegible]

THE UGLY

[illegible]

[illegible]

>> By mid-2006, Apple computers will have Intel inside. Here's hoping we'll be blasting each other in *UT 2007* over AppleTalk servers shortly thereafter. >>

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UNREAL TOURNAMENT 2007

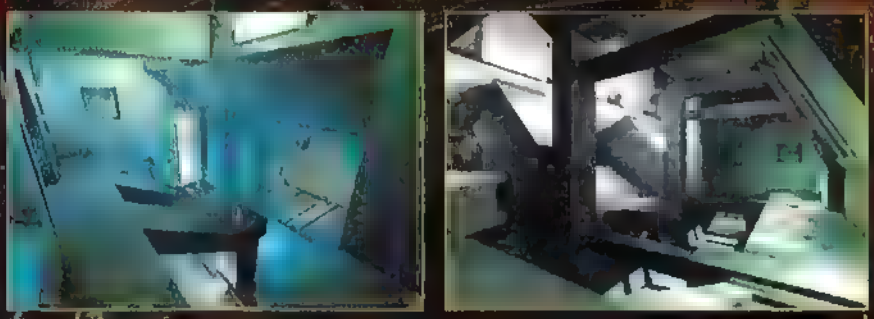
Lookin' good...

PUBLISHER Midway DEVELOPER Epic Games GENRE Shooter RELEASE DATE 2006

EXCLUSIVE SCREEN

BACK IN MAY, THE GOOD GUYS AT EPIC Games let us in on the secret to their success: perfect *UT2K7*'s gameplay in untextured level "shells" before rendering what you'll see in-game. At the time, it was too early for them to show us much more than the first step in the process, as seen in the inset pictures. Imagine, then, the s***-eating grins on our faces when we sat down behind closed doors with Epic at E3 and were treated to a playable level resplendent with the aesthetics you see splashed across these two pages. Oh, and the gameplay was damn fine, too, demonstrating the less-bouncy movement the developers described back in May and featuring tons of the attitude you've come to expect from the franchise. We can't wait to get our hands on the mad new vehicles and weapons, like the Scorpion and rocket launcher you see here. / Kristen Salvatore

Intel has been slapped with another antitrust lawsuit by rival chipmaker AMD, which claims that Intel has used coercive tactics to secure OEM deals



UT2K7's levels are first created without textures, to test and tweak gameplay.

> "We can play through and make tweaks...before there's pretty stuff splashed all over the concepts."
>
> "The Unreal World", Computer Gaming World #251

with 38 companies. Blizzard's taking a note from Id Software and starting its own free gaming festival. BlizzCon will take place October 28 and 29

COLUMN

GLADSTONED

Great moments in gaming punditry

Every five years, some alleged game industry "expert" earns a berth on the short bus with this half-witted assessment: "PC gaming is dead." I know I touched upon this briefly in my last column, but I'm pissed. One such clown in the mainstream media recently wrote of his willingness to predict that the real loser to the emergence of the Xbox 360 and PS3 will be PC gaming. Buddy, PC gaming isn't dead. Not by a long shot. OK, so the new consoles demoed at E3 look pretty interesting (even though the Xbox 360 was running on an Apple G5 workstation and the PS3 demo was running on... wait for it... a PC with two GeForce 7800 GTX cards in SLI mode) but what those consoles can do now, a PC will do better in six to eight months.

Some refer to Moore's Law, but I like to call the console versus PC battle "The Five Year Itch." In 1996, the original Playstation launched for $300. I had a 32-bit RISC CPU (33 9MHz) 2MB RAM, 1MB Video RAM and proprietary technology to handle 3D graphics. At the time, a $3,000 gaming PC packed a 200MHz Pentium CPU, 32MB DRAM, and 2MB Video RAM, and the first good 3D cards were coming out. These numbers seem a little skewed, but since a console is streamlined for gaming, it can operate faster and requires less horsepower than your standard-issue PC rig.

Over the next five years, programmers tried to eke as much as possible from the PS1 before hitting a technology wall. After all, you can't upgrade a console. When the PS2 neared U.S. shores, promising a 300MHz CPU, 4MB DRAM, 4MB VRAM, and another proprietary graphics engine for $300, gaming PCs similarly beefed up. A lean machine sported an AMD Athlon 750, 128MB SDRAM, and a 64MB graphics card for about $1,500. Fast-forward another five years to mid-2006 and the PS3's arrival. The PS3 may shock you with its power when it launches but I'm willing to bet my graphics card you can expect low- to mid-level computers to easily dwarf the power of the new consoles by as much as a year (two, tops) of their launch. And soon, thanks to XNA, you'll finally be able to play a game on your PC as you do on the consoles, simply by sticking a disc in the drive—without having to perform an actual installation. XNA promises developers it can easily standardize game coding (and allow you to use Xbox 360 controllers on your PC). And with the coming gaming/consumer-friendly new Windows OS, code-named Longhorn, Microsoft is making a broader, more aggressive case for PC gaming in general.

> **You can expect low- to mid-level computers to dwarf the power of the new consoles within a year of their launch.**

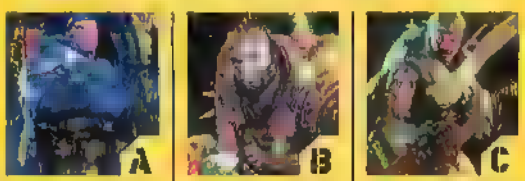
Yes, your average PC will cost more than a console. But really, how much more will it cost? Speculation has it that the Xbox 360 and PS3 will be a little pricey—possibly as much as $400—and they can do only a fraction of the things a PC can. You can get a great performance PC for under $2,000, and I know plenty of other things I can do with it beyond gaming, prON downloads aside.

PCs have the market cornered on MMOs, FPS games, and countless strategy and RPG titles. Consoles have their strengths, obviously—ease of use and couch-potato gaming being at the top of the list. Point is, there's enough room in my house for a PC and a console. How about you? **Darren Gladstone** *darren_gladstone@ziffdavis.com*

THIS IS A CONDENSED VERSION OF THE RANT DARREN SPEWED FORTH ON CGW_GIZMO.1UP.COM.

NAME THAT PLATFORM

QUESTION: Three games on three platforms, all using the same engine. Which is which?



ANSWER: *EPIC'S UNREAL 3 ENGINE PROVIDES THE BEST EXAMPLE OF WHAT IS POSSIBLE ON EACH PLATFORM. TECHNICALLY, THE XBOX 360 DEMO OF GEARS OF WAR (SHOT A) WAS RUNNING OFF AN APPLE G5 WORKSTATION. THE PS3 DEMO OF UNREAL TOURNAMENT (SHOT B) WAS DONE ON A HIGH-END PC WITH TWO NEXT-GEN NVIDIA CARDS IN SLI MODE. MEANWHILE, THE PC'S UNREAL TOURNAMENT 2007 (SHOT C) LOOKS EQUALLY FANTASTIC, BUT CONSOLES DON'T EXACTLY IMPROVE WITH AGE—PCS DO.*

CONSOLE CORNER
A LOOK AT THE REST OF THE GAMING WORLD

There are plenty of good games out there beyond what's on the PC. Whether you also own a PS2, Xbox, GameCube, PSP, DS, or—heaven help you—an N-gage, we're here to help. So here's our pick for the best of the console world now shipping to store shelves.

SONY'S PSP

> **Sony's handheld, the PSP, could very well be the next Walkman.**

>> In Orange County, California. >> In a move that shocked absolutely no one (2 million users worldwide can't be wrong), Blizzard recently announced >>

The RPG for the Next Generation

Visit www.esrb.org for updated rating information.

PC SOFTWARE

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WORLD OF

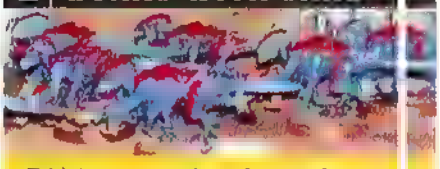
PLAY IT! CHECK OUT THE DEMO ON THIS MONTH'S DVD

More than just a bunch of geeky miniatures

We don't know what the *Warhammer* masterminds at Games Workshop have put in the water, but we like it. Thanks to the popularity of last year's *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War*, we're starting to see a massive resurgence in PC games based on the miniature fantasy war-game franchise. Not only is a *Dawn of War* expansion due out soon from THQ, but Namco is also working on an all-new RTS featuring the classic *Warhammer* license (not to be confused with the postapocalyptic *Warhammer 40K* license), and the MMO virtuosos at Mythic have acquired the rights to the ever-delayed *Warhammer Online*. Check out a few of the reasons why it's a great time to be a *Warhammer* fan—and why *Warhammer* isn't just for tabletop RPG geeks anymore. Ryan Scott

The Imperial guard joins the four existing factions in *Winter Assault*.

DORKS WITH ORKS



Tabletop gamers have been enjoying the *Warhammer* miniatures game since 1982. Every year, Games Workshop holds tournaments for both *Warhammer* and *Warhammer 40,000* around the world, where hobbyists gather to compete with custom hand-painted armies of pewter miniatures. There are roughly 14 massive armies to choose from in competitive play, and new figures and scenery are released every week. For more information on the tabletop game, check out Games Workshop's retail stores, *White Dwarf* magazine, and official website (www.games-workshop.com).

WARHAMMER ONLINE

Back from the dead

PUBLISHER **Mythic Entertainment** DEVELOPER **Mythic Entertainment** GENRE **MMORPG** RELEASE DATE **2007**

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

SURPRISE! *WARHAMMER ONLINE*, which was canceled last year by former developer Climax, is back on its feet—and thanks to the folks at Mythic, we might be running machine-gun-toting orks and hardy space marines through a massively multiplayer *Warhammer* world as early as 2007. While details are still scarce in this early stage of development, we had a chance to chat with producer Lance Robertson about some of the things we can look forward to in *Warhammer Online*.

CGW: Which *Warhammer* license will you be using—the *40K* universe or classic *Warhammer*?

Robertson: This MMORPG title will be based on all Games Workshop products relating to the classic *Warhammer* fantasy world. The creative people at Games Workshop have produced a wealth of great material, and this provides us with a solid foundation for the game. The depth of cool background information, the inspired designs of the races and their weapons of war, and the interesting dynamics of the warring factions make this property a pleasure to work on.

CGW: What will the focus of this game be? How much will PVP figure into it?

Robertson: The game will be centered on warring alliances in a realm-versus-realm setup. This means that all of the game's activities will in some way support the broader war. This includes PVE content.

CGW: Will there be any crafting?

Robertson: Yes, crafting will be well integrated into the game and play a valuable role in supporting your realm's war effort. However, there will be no daisy picking in this game!

CGW: Are you going to use any of the material Climax developed previously?

Robertson: All the material that was created for the previous MMORPG is available to us for this project. Games Workshop was heavily involved in the creation of new material for that game and produced some interesting and excellent stuff for that project. We are currently in preproduction mode and evaluating what designs make sense in order to create a great *Warhammer* MMORPG. Naturally, we'll be working very closely with the people of Games Workshop to make sure that the game is as true to the [license] as possible. We're very pleased with the relationship we're forging with them, and come 2007, the results should speak for themselves.

> "There will be no daisy picking in this game."

>> the first *World of WarCraft* expansion on its official forums. >> After wrapping the controversial console game *25 to Life*, Ritual Entertainment is >>

WARHAMMER

WARHAMMER 40,000: DAWN OF WAR—WINTER ASSAULT

Nuclear winter

PUBLISHER **THQ** DEVELOPER **Relic** GENRE **RTS** RELEASE DATE **Fall 2005**

PREVIEW

SO TO BE BRUTALLY HONEST, THE FORMULA for an RTS expansion is extremely predictable: Add a new faction, toss in a few extra units for the old factions, introduce a new single-player campaign or two, and make some gameplay tweaks. Yes, *Winter Assault* follows this formula—but we're gonna go out on a limb and predict that this expansion to CGW's 2004 RTS of the Year will rise above the mediocrity of your everyday add-on.

Why do we say this? The development team at Relic is taking great care to incorporate player feedback into the expansion, addressing many of the original *Dawn of War*'s minor yet discernable shortcomings. Each of the existing four armies gets a unit that helps fill a hole in its battle strategy: The space marines now have the chaplain, a commander unit with powerful ranged attacks, orks get the mega-armored nob, a mechanized terror that can mow down entire squads on the front lines; the eldar fire dragon is a specialized antivehicle unit; and the chaos marines have the khorne berserker, a fast, high-powered melee monster. These new troops bring each army more closely in line with one another—and give them the firepower needed to contend with the brand-new imperial guard faction.

IMPERIAL ENTANGLEMENTS

The imperial guard is designed to alleviate one of the biggest complaints about *Dawn of War*: its sometimes-difficult learning curve. This faction is designed with new players in mind; troops attack in large numbers, fighting with a heavily defense-oriented ranged combat style, augmented by extremely long-range (and high-cost) artillery units and the arcane psyker's fatal soul-stripping ability. The imperial guard's "big gun" is the Baneblade, a gigantic tank with nearly a dozen mounted weapons. While this may sound overpowering, the imperial guard has one big weakness: low troop morale, poetically conveyed by the new commissar unit that literally shoots deserters in the back.

To round things out, two new campaigns (good and evil) are present in an attempt to amend the linearity of the original game's single-player mode. Yes, it looks and sounds like a typical expansion—but with the care Relic has shown the franchise so far, we're hoping *Winter Assault* will do for *Dawn of War* what *Brood War* did for *StarCraft*.

The development team at Relic is taking great care to incorporate player feedback into the expansion.

BEFORE DAWN OF WAR...

Warhammer: Shadow of the Horned Rat *(Mindscape)* This strategy-RPG featured tactical real-time battles and an engaging story, even if the clunky interface did make for a few rough edges.

1995

Final Liberation: Warhammer Epic 40,000 *(SSI)* *Epic 40K* faithfully recreated the tabletop game experience—which made it especially appealing to hardcore *Warhammer* grognards.

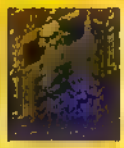
★★★★

1997

Warhammer: Dark Omen *(Electronic Arts)* Interface problems plagued this early *Warhammer* RTS. The in-depth micro management was great for RTS junkies but left tabletop purists in the dust.

★★★★

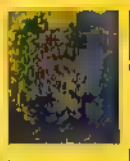
1998



Warhammer 40,000: Chaos Gate *(SSI)* *Chaos Gate* fell back on the turn-based approach...and despite having a short campaign with only one playable faction, it still managed to deliver a compelling *Warhammer* experience.

★★★★

1998



Warhammer 40,000: Rites of War *(SSI)* Yet another turn-based war game, *Rites of War* combined a dated graphics engine with tepid, fairly uninspired gameplay, resulting in a largely mediocre package.

1999

Warhammer 40,000: Fire Warrior *(THQ)* Developer Kuju Entertainment traded the strategic elements of *Warhammer* for a linear, by-the-numbers shooter. It had little to offer FPS gamers and even less for tabletop fans.

★★

2003

WARHAMMER RTS

Total war

PUBLISHER **Namco**
DEVELOPER **Synergy Interactive**
GENRE **RTS** RELEASE DATE **2006**

BREAKING NEWS

THQ MAY HAVE THE MONOPOLY ON *Warhammer 40K*, but Namco has scooped up the classic *Warhammer* fantasy license in yet another step to cement the company's new love affair with PC gaming. Namco's upcoming RTS was shown at this year's E3, though gameplay details were scant. We do know that you'll trade *Dawn of War*'s firearms and tanks for swords and plate mail, leading armies of orks and chaos warriors across fantasy battlefields, where the game will focus on epic-scale combat scenarios. With THQ still retaining the *40K* license, perhaps we might eventually get to see these two properties go head-to-head

>> going back to its roots; it has registered a site for *SIN 2*. Is a sequel on the way? >> MTV is launching a new division, MTV Games, in the same >>

THE CHRONICLES OF CREPESUZETTE

WHERE'S EGGBERT?

A second gnome's journey through *World of WarCraft*

YOU MIGHT BE THINKING THIS CGW redesign is so powerful that it's even made Eggbert more attractive. But (though there's no denying the mad skills of CGW art director Michael) you'd be wrong. As Eggbert has been briefly sidetracked in his quest to find a suitable mount, he has temporarily handed over the reins to me, Crepesuzette, a gnome rogue bravely soldiering her way through the hinterlands.

I'M A LONER, DOTTIE

Thanks to my natural antisociainess, I've been immune to MMORPGs prior to *WOW*, but the ability to slash my way through Azeroth solo has me hooked (and when I say hooked, I mean that my husband has scheduled an intervention with a marriage counselor). While I tend to be a hacker in combat, the rogue class has suited my independence well: There's nothing like going into stealth mode, sneaking up behind a skeletal fiend, garroting him, and then finishing him off with a few fierce eviscerations.

Due to my newbie status when starting out, I didn't realize that I wouldn't be able to use any of my mining and blacksmithing skills for my own benefit, but I conned another player into studying herbalism, so we have a healthy trade going—I supply the latest fashions in breastplates, and he keeps me sedated with healing potions. All in all, these coincidences (born of good game design) have melded nicely to make my first 25 levels a halcyon blur of bloody backstabbing and gory gouging that lets me sleep well at night.

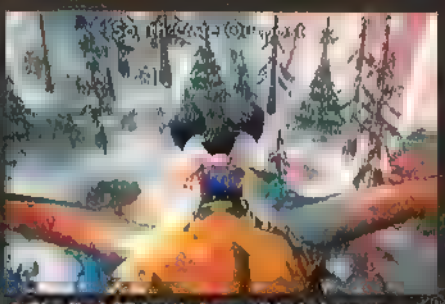
LET'S GET TOGETHER

And then comes level 26. Up until this point, I have resisted the sirens' call of enticements such as "weres stiches" and "LFG deadmines need rouge," but a couple of things have made me realize that I will need to change my ways. One is that dying in five seconds instead of two doesn't mark a lot of progress in my elite quests, even though the difficulty level has been downgraded from orange to green. The other is that a higher-level friend has been hackling me about whether I've tackled the Westfall Defias Brotherhood quests, because apparently completing that series will score me some really sweet loot.

When I'm not busy being a loner, I'm busy being a control freak, which is why I decide that rather than accepting one of the guild invitations that has been extended, it would be preferable to start my own guild so I'm not stuck at the mercy of some tyrant who can't stand it when others run the show. Now instead of going on solo crocolisk-massacring sprees to further my cooking skill, I'm spending time socializing with all of the people I so assiduously avoided for my first 100 hours. Damn you, Blizzard.

/ Dana Jongewaard

In her free time, Crepesuzette likes cooking crocolisk gumbo and blacksmithing bronze bracers.



The first 25 levels have glided along as smoothly as a gryphon ride.

Those elite mo'grosh enforcers may only be level 19, but they're still kicking nonelite level 26 gnome butt.

Dying in five seconds instead of two doesn't mark a lot of progress in my elite quests.

No man—or gnome—is an island; Crepesuzette visits a guild master.

Crepesuzette uses her silver-tongued ways to find people to join the guild.

>> manner it started MTV Films years ago. While there are few details at the moment, we do know that MTV has already signed a three-game deal with Midway. >>

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DID YOU KNOW?

Prey was thought to have been cancelled in 1999 because 3D Realms was working on three games at the same time.

ELUSIVE PREY

Infamous vaporware, *Prey* is back from the great beyond—and looking great

In 1996, *Prey* was on every game editor's lips. The cutting-edge graphics, the promise of a deep story-driven shooter rooted in Native American culture, and 3D Realms' revolutionary portal technology were going to usher in whole new ways to play. And then, just like that, it vanished.

PUBLISHER **2K Games** DEVELOPER **Human Head Studios** GENRE **Shooter** RELEASE DATE **Mid-2006**

FIRST LOOK

"THE SHORT VERSION IS THAT WE BIT OFF more than we could chew," says 3D Realms founder and CEO Scott Miller. "We had just started *Duke Nukem Forever* at the same time, and we even had a third never-announced project, *Bombshell*. After nearly two years of trying to make *Prey* with an undermanned team, we saw that it wasn't going to happen and made the tough decision to cancel the project."

During the long silence, though, 3D Realms has been busy. Busy working for what seems like forever on *Duke Nukem Forever*...and secretly retooling *Prey* for an unsuspecting public for release in 2006. Well, in truth, 3D Realms executive producer George Broussard passed the *Prey* torch to Wisconsin-based Human Head Studios. So here we are, a mere six to 12 months away from seeing the game done (or as Broussard puts it, "It'll be ready when it's ready"...yadda, yadda, yadda), and *Prey* still holds the same promise from nine years ago: that it will be a deep story-driven shooter rooted in Native American culture and include great graphics and some cool new gameplay mechanics working behind the scenes. We had to see this for ourselves to believe it.

THE STORY SO FAR

I'm reading the press release right now, and it says: "*Prey* makes use of Joseph Campbell's renowned story structure, 'The Hero's Journey,'...made famous when George Lucas used it for the original *Star Wars*." It even has bullet-pointed "a deep, emotional story of 'love and sacrifice'" as one of the key features of the game. This is the first thing to call them on. Don't a lot of games claim to go this route? *Half-Life* and *KOTOR* sure did. Broussard, though, thinks that not one game has yet come along and sold that drama exceedingly well. Miller adds, "I think we've mostly achieved our goal of making a tragic love story within the FPS genre, one that players will care about. This was not a part of the original design for *Prey*." Cue the demo.

The game unfolds in an interactive cut-scene. You're strapped to a table and all you can hear are the screams of other people in the distance and the voice of your girlfriend, Jenny. As a conveyor belt moves you both, a voiceover, your voice, narrates as your life is flashing before your eyes. You're Tommy. A Cherokee, you joined the U.S. Rangers at an early age to escape the reservation. Denying your heritage, you've been trying to convince your girlfriend to leave with you.

> Your weapon of choice, the assault rifle, is ripped off an alien's arm!

The tag line for the game, "Earth's savior doesn't want the job," pretty much sums up Tommy. Even though he's apparently chosen by the spirits of his people to save the world, he just wants to get off this alien ship and save his gal. You eventually embrace your heritage and gain mystical powers in the process. This entire story unfolds from a first-person perspective. No cut-scenes, just a living world that you're interacting with. (Well, it is a linear script and you can't choose the conversation paths, but you get the idea.)

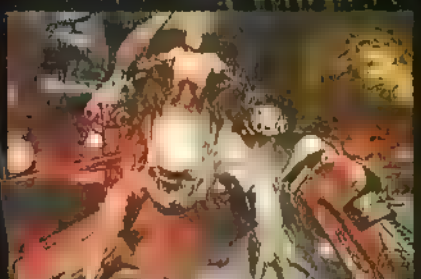
To illustrate the point, cut to the first in-game sequence you have control of, which takes place back at the bar on the reservation. True to 3D Realms' form, the environment is highly interactive, just as *Duke Nukem 3D*'s was way back when. Here, it's kicked up to the nth degree. Beyond flushing toilets and playing interactive arcade games, you can walk over to the jukebox, where Blue Oyster Cult's "Don't Fear the Reaper" is playing, and change the tune if you like. People are talking, you chat with Jenny for a couple seconds, and then it starts. The lights flicker and the ground shakes a little. Suddenly, a bright green light appears outside. A pickup truck launches straight up like a rocket, pulled by something. The roof of the bar is being torn off as patrons scream and cling to whatever they can. Debris, bar stools, and eventually everyone follows.

The script and this scene certainly show lots of promise for what lies ahead, but there are a number of innovations that are equally, if not more, important to *Prey*.

>> The good, the bad, and the thrasher *Tony Hawk* developer Neversoft is hard at work on *Gun*, a GTA-like Western gun-fighting game due out this fall. >>

Talon (on the right) helps out by providing a distraction while you blast some alien scum.

He's not exactly Chief Iron Eyes Cody, but Tommy's grandfather does his best to remind Tommy of his Cherokee heritage.



Stop us if you've heard this: "What do you get when you cross an alien with a human?"

SPIRITS IN THE MATERIAL WORLD

A big part of the narrative is steeped in Cherokee culture. It not only helps the game unfold, but also opens up some unique gameplay styles. Human Head studios CEO and co-founder Tim Gerritsen explains, "As you make your way through this alien spaceship, you start getting visions." These visions are of your grandfather urging you to accept your heritage to help save Jenny—and the planet. The Land of Ancients, the desert hills and plains of your visions, is in complete contrast to outer space. It is the training area where you gradually earn your powers.

HR GIGER, EAT YOUR HEART OUT

Prey isn't *Doom 3.5*—although it does use a modified version of the *Doom* engine. So, yes, the creatures seem a little reminiscent of Id's monstrosities, but their attacks, and how you'll fight back, feel unique.

Senior programmer and co-founder Chris Rhinehart promises that the aliens will be superintelligent; they'll call for backup and try to protect themselves beyond just hiding, they'll run to the nearest health power-up stations, and they'll look for ammo. They're aware of everything interactive in the environment and will use it against you.

(POTENTIAL) SPOILER ALERT! The ship in orbit around earth is actually a living Dyson sphere, according to Gerritsen. It goes through the universe absorbing whatever it stumbles upon—spaceships, asteroids (one with its own unique gravity lies at the center of the sphere), people, you name it. As a result, anything not digested outright by the ship is a parasite. Some aliens will help you. Many have made their "deals with the devil," serving the ship to survive.

As a result, everything has a very biomechanical feel. Items are grafted onto each other—organic membranes serve as "sphinc-doors"

HEADS OF STATE

What is Human Head Studios—and why is it working on *Prey*?

HUMAN HEADS ON HAND: Tim Gerritsen, CEO/cofounder, and Chris Rhinehart, senior programmer/cofounder, both former developers with Raven Software.

FIRST PROJECT AFTER LEAVING RAVEN SOFTWARE: *Rune*, a Viking-themed action game that uses the *Unreal Tournament* engine. Broussard was a fan of *Rune* and, ultimately, it is what got 3D Realms' attention.

WAS SECRETLY WORKING ON: *Daikatana 2* before the original was even done. Eidos rightly canned the project.

RIGHT PLACE, RIGHT TIME: To be able to work on *Prey*. Human Head has been slaving away on this project for about three years, starting practically from scratch, rebooting the story, and rethinking how to build the alien ship.

GOT SPIRIT?

Tommy's Cherokee power—revealed

SPIRIT GUIDE

Talon (not so ironically, the original name of the hero of *Prey*) is the name of your animal totem, a hawk. A childhood pet that now helps from beyond, Talon does a number of things throughout the game. First, he can spot points of interest. If you're lost, he'll perch near something that you may have missed. Second, he's a universal translator. Walk near an alien control panel, and when Talon arrives, he can help you read what is on the screen. He can even distract aliens.

SPIRIT WALKING

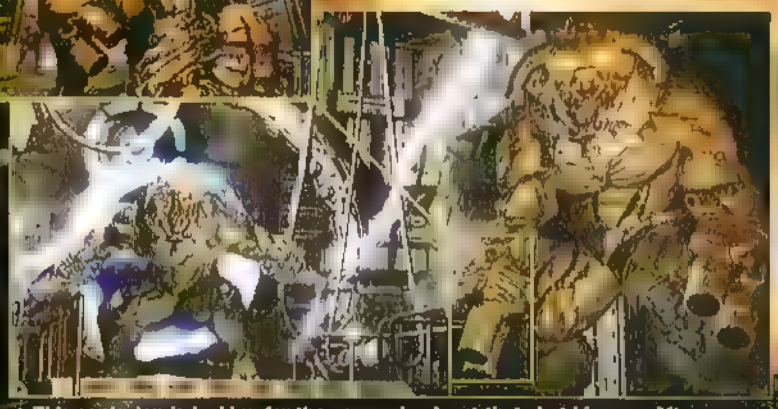
When you want to focus on stealth and puzzle solving, you can jump into spirit walking mode. In this mode, nobody can see you unless you attack. Pass through shields to unlock unreachable areas and use your spirit bow to swat away enemies—like the nasty wraiths. (In one jarring sequence, a wraith possesses a little girl who then proceeds to thrash another child. It's straight-up creepy to have to blast a bunch of possessed kids.)

[illegible]

Probably the lamest but most unavoidable issue in any game is death. Kick the bucket, and you load your last quicksave. "Why pull someone out of the experience?" asks Gerritsen. In *Prey*, keeping with the mythology, you're kicked out of your body into a sort of limbo upon death. Wraiths circle overhead, waiting to claim your body. Now, *Prey* turns into a minigame. Start skeet-shooting spooks with your spirit bow until your body is reclaimed. As soon as you do that, you're born again...so to speak.

>> It should come as little surprise at this point that EA has plans for a sequel to *The Battle for Middle-earth*. Umm, isn't the battle already over? >>

▲ The world's biggest Rubik's C... Brousard says, "the most comp... switch." This is one of *Prey*'s mar...



▲ This centurion is looking for the no-good polecat that shot his paw. After you perforate your first one, his sidearm (read: his arm) becomes your weapon. This is the biomechanical assault rifle. There's no "ammo," but don't let it overheat.

▲ Here's what happens when you don't feed your irradiated pups their Kibbles 'n Bits.

▲ Using portals, hunters can seemingly pop in from out of nowhere.

(gotta love that name!), and alien monsters sprout firearms. This carries over into your weaponry as well. The assault rifle you eventually get is, in fact, the arm of a centurion creature that you ripped off after defeating it. Small, combustible creatures known as crawlers serve as grenades—tear off one's head like it's an extra-spicy Cajun shrimp and lob it into a crowd. Alternately, pluck off a couple legs and it's a sticky bomb.

But this game is far from some trippy, easily categorized FPS in which HR Giger will meet M.C. Escher. Beyond the melding of man (or alien) and machine comes surrealistic gravity and reality-bending environments. And puzzles—lots of logic puzzles. In fact, Miller says, "We wanted to have an ebb and flow to the game's pacing so that it's not all relentless action. I think the *Half-Life* games have successfully shown that a good mix of puzzle gameplay works well in an FPS. So, with *Prey*, we're leaning to a 60/40 split between action and puzzles."

Portal technology was a big deal back in 1997. What it means, in essence, is that each area is treated as an individual room. Wow. Not much of a big deal these days, but the portals here are used with insane amounts of new effects. Portals tear open constantly around the ship. Alien "hound" creatures will leap out from another part

THE NEXT BIG THIN

Scott Miller on the original game: "I look back at the original *Prey* screenshots we have, and they make me cringe."

>> Red Warrior is about to die. Scratch that: Red Warrior is dead. The PC version of *Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows* has been canceled. >>

▲ Here's an artist's rendition of the world-sucking ship that you're trapped inside. Want to see it's chewy center? (It's just below.)

▲ Learn the gravity of this situation—and quick! There's nothing trippier than raining death down from the side of a wall.

▲ There's an asteroid sliding in the middle of this sphere ship.

of the ship and pounce. Hunter aliens will try to ambush you as well. (Here's a trick for you: These foes also serve as hidden areas. Quickly kill a creature and jump into the portal it came from and you can loot whatever it had stashed.) In a very house-of-mirrors area rife with portals, you need to navigate a hallway where you see reflections of yourself everywhere. If you're not paying attention, you wind up walking in circles.

Gravity plays a significant role in level design as well. Switches throughout the ship flip gravity so that up is down and down is up. And, since we're dealing with an aliens, why would they need conventional ladders? Throughout the ship are wall-walking areas. Providing localized gravity, they allow you to walk along the walls while your bullets follow the ordinary laws of physics. So, theoretically, you could be standing upside down while lobbing grenades to the ground below. Of course, this opens up lots of insane potential for multiplayer matches. Just pull the lever to shut down the wall-walk and enemies go splat on the ground below.

While it is premature to discuss multiplayer, Garriaan assures us that while *Prey* is still largely a single-player experience, there will be multiplayer maps. Some will play largely on gravity-tweaking themes; some will have plenty of portals; others will meld elements of both. Ideally, Human Head wants to support up to eight players in deathmatches, but that is for another day and another follow-up story.

The jaded cynic inside has been quieted. The spirits of old, enthusiastic editors speak to me in visions (unless Johnny Wilson and Elliott Chin just swung by the office and I was a little tipsy) with some hope that this game will make good on promises from almost a decade ago. If *Prey* stays on course and breaks the 3D Realms "curse" of not releasing games, we could be in for something great. Or maybe the next generation of *CGW* will be writing about this in 2013. / Darren Gladstone

REGULAR

THAT WAS THEN: SEPTEMBER 1995

A fond look back at the way we were

We figured the end was nigh. After all, Newt Gingrich's book *To Renew America* was topping the best-seller lists, and people were actually paying good money to see Patrick Swayze and Wesley Snipes dress up in drag for *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar*.

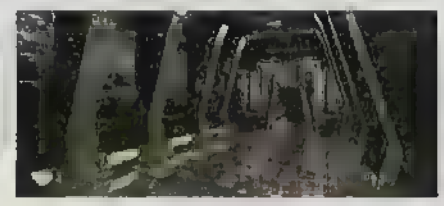
But the jackass of the month award winner in September of 1995 was Senator Bob Packwood of Oregon. Packwood, who served in the Senate for 27 years, was expelled due to sexual misconduct with 29 women. To which he said: "In some cases, I was very frankly so drunk that I cannot remember the evening." Nicely done!

On the tech front, a little thing called Windows 95 was coming out, and it prompted us to boldly proclaim, "DOS is dead!" in a huge feature that broke down all the ins and outs of the new OS. Also, during this "simpler" time, we offered a roundup of 14 different game controllers, all of which would eventually be replaced...by the keyboard and mouse! /

▲ "Hey, evil, possessed kids! Wanna go play with this exploding creature for a second?"

...OF 1998 Here's what we had to say about *Prey* way back in our June 1997 issue

"Is this *Myst*? The graphics for *Prey* already look stunning. Of course, environments are still unpopulated and much of the game isn't even in the production stages yet."



"*Prey* is currently scheduled for release in mid-1998 and will require at least a Pentium 133 with a 3D graphics accelerator."

"3D Realms is content to let the 'rabble' fight it out for second-generation supremacy [against *Quake*]. *Prey* will come in and pick off the winner."

>> While we are fans of the *Evil Dead* series, we're not fans of crappy games—hopefully, *Evil Dead: Regeneration* isn't one of 'em. <<

CALL OF DUT

Channeling history to your desktop—again

PUBLISHER **Activision** DEVELOPER **Infinity Ward** GENRE **Shooter** RELEASE DATE **Q4 2005**

EXCLUSIVE SCREENS

INFINITY WARD'S SHELL-SHOCKING WWII shooter *Call of Duty 2* is almost too tense. Machine guns growl, flying clods of dirt mix with fragments of metal and fire, and gaping windows pour out torrents of billowing dust. On the first pass, you don't get the details so much as the general

din—existence as a pair of terrified eyes. In a way, it's like seeing your first Axis-and-Allies shoot-em-up, back before they started to smack of tram tours through animatronic history attractions.

Then the rumbling explosions become a background rhythm. You pick out people in the human tide, faces streaked with filth and sweat. Your squadmate warns, "Watch out, soldier behind that 88!" and there he is, squatting beside the German gun. You can attribute the combat chatter to veteran authenticity advisors Capt. John Hillen and Col. Hank Kelsey (both retired), who insisted the [illegible] and fury—the original [illegible] sorely [illegible] the action unfolded.

[illegible]

>> which has us wondering about the upcoming PC game *Evil Dead: Regeneration*. Will it be groovy? Only Bruce Campbell knows. >>

Y 2

ments, and to show you where your men have engaged the enemy—another insight attributed to Hillen and Kelsey. Above all, your allies are more than just a few extra pairs of eyes; they keep their heads down when the heavy fire comes, they fall back on defensible terrain when flanked, and they fight hard—without help—while you take your own path through *COD2*'s branching, war-torn battlegrounds. **/Shawn Elliot**

>> Your allies are more than just a few pairs of eyes.

NEXT MONTH...

>> *Max Payne* is hitting the silver screen. 20th Century Fox and Collision Entertainment are hard at work on the recently announced film, which >>

INDEPENDENT'S DAY

Advice from the experts

WITH THE *WORLD OF WARCRAFTS* OF THE GAME WORLD hogging attention all the time, some smaller games never get their chance in the spotlight. Now they will. Every month, we'll handpick one independent title that deserves a shot at the "big time." That game will be eyeballed by a panel of two game-industry professionals and a *CGW* editor. The group will offer perspective and (we hope) a little constructive criticism to the developer. This month's pick:

GODS & HEROES: ROME RISING

DEVELOPER: Perpetual Entertainment
RELEASE DATE: Q4 2005
WEBSITE: www.godsandheroes.com

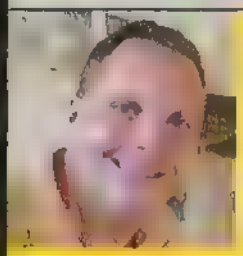
As a hero of Rome—and child of the gods—you'll live Roman mythology, where heroes and monsters mingle. After picking a character class (soldier, scout, priest, mystic, rogue, or gladiator) and deity daddy (or mommy), you'll battle the empire's enemies and mythological beasties. Perpetual is perpetuating two big bullet points here: "epic" story-driven quests that are bigger and deeper than anything currently being done, and the ability to eventually helm an NPC squad—which you hire, train, and control.

This month's judges are David Cole, an analyst with DFC Intelligence who follows the MMO space; *CGW*'s resident MMOron, Darren Gladstone, who is currently juggling characters in four different MMOs; and Starr Long, who worked on *Ultima Online* before becoming the producer of NCsoft's *Tabula Rasa*.

Hey developers, want us to check out your games? Send an e-mail to CGWletters@ziffdavis.com with the subject line: INDEPENDENT'S DAY.

▲ In *Gods & Heroes*, you'll take on the role of a Roman hero during the empire's classical mythological time period.

ANALYST/FOUNDER, DFC INTELLIGENCE

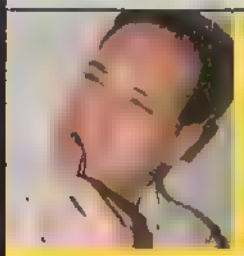


Nice subject matter. but wait! This has a historical motif. Aren't all MMORPGs supposed to be fantasy or sci-fi based? What's cool here is that ancient history is a comparatively unique, but not completely off-the-wall, theme. And as titles like *Age of Empires* prove, it's a popular one. But no one's done much with the topic online.

Of course, how far the title really strays from standard-issue fare remains to be seen...it appears deities and their mystical powers will play a big role. That may or may not be a positive from a consumer's perspective.

The game could stand out in an overcrowded market. But will I truly feel like a Roman gladiator or is this actually just another thinly veiled me-too fantasy MMO in disguise? Assuming *Gods & Heroes* can define itself, a success would be 100,000 subscribers. Gladiators aren't as universally popular as superheroes, so I see a 200,000 subscriber base as a long shot. /

SENIOR EDITOR, COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

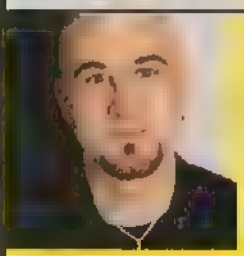


As a guy who aced Roman history—mostly thanks to a Ray Harryhausen marathon—I'm ready to release the kraken...as it were.

First thing I noticed: "Wow, that warrior I created looks a little too Spartacus and not enough *Gladiator* for my tastes." Still, I do like the deep character customization for creating Festivus the Mighty. *Gods & Heroes* promises lots of skills, god powers, and so on—but what MMO doesn't? The one thing that looks "epic" is NPC squad command.

Boss around up to eight NPCs, then try teaming with other players. Suddenly, you've got a small army. Nobody's done this before. Know why? It's tough to pull off. I'd like to see Perpetual adopt some of the conventional RTS control methods we've come to know and love—especially when it comes to streamlined target designation. Otherwise, heated battles could be tactical nightmares, switching between NPCs—and keeping Festivus alive! /

PRODUCER, TABULA RASA, NCSOFT



It's nice to see a variation on the medieval fantasy theme, even if it's still swords-and-armory based. It may help the title separate itself from all the *D&D* clones. I, for one, love the idea of running around in a skirt and sandals (wait, was that out loud?).

The squad combat seems interesting...if Perpetual can pull it off. No one's doing any kind of NPC warfare like these guys are talking about. I mean, who doesn't want to order around a bunch of sweaty men in skirts? They would need lots of hard training, of course (damn, thinking out loud again).

I just wish Perpetual had gotten the *Clash of the Titans* license. Calibos, the clockwork owl, Ursula Andress as Aphrodite, Harry Hamlin...I could go on forever, but I digress.

This appears to be an interesting game with some elements—especially the setting—that could set it apart from the pack. /

producer Scott Faye claims will have a very Dirty Harry–like feel. 'Hot Coffee' in *GTA: San Andreas*? Not that it should be a huge shock,

SOMETIMES THE

HUMAN RACE

HAS TO START OVER...

ADVENT RISING

"INNOVATIVE AS HELL, AND THE MOST EMOTIVE TITLE TO HIT ANY PLATFORM IN AGES."
-GamePro

EPIC IN EVERY SENSE OF THE WORD." Play

"A GAME OF EPIC PROPORTIONS" -IGN

Soundtrack Available on Sumthing Else MusicWorks

TEEN T
Blood
Mild Language
Violence
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

XBOX LIVE PC CD BRADYGAMES ATI MAJESCO

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2005 E3 POST-MORTEM

E3, TAKE II

CGW editors revisit their pre-show predictions

WAY BACK IN OUR JUNE ISSUE, we put on our swami hats and tried to predict what would be hot and not at the annual Electronic Entertainment Expo, the gaming industry's biggest, noisiest, and smelliest event of the year. Do we know what we're talking about? Are we morons? Here's a look at what we predicted we'd see...and true confessions of what we actually saw.

RISE OF NATIONS: RISE OF LEGENDS

What We Said: "Unlike its loosely history-based predecessor, [*ROL*] taps into a *WarCraft*-style fantasy vein, replacing infantrymen and tanks with magic users and airships."
What We Saw: The sequel to *Rise of Nations* is looking nothing like the original...it's looking better. Sci-fi fantasy fare, combined with a simplified two-resource system (gold and timonium), promises you'll spend more time building and battling and less time harvesting.

HELLGATE: LONDON

What We Said: "The only thing missing now is practical proof that Flagship's first release can make a first-person RPG fun to play."
What We Saw: In theory, *Hellgate*'s sick-looking enemies, cool environments, and nifty RPG elements should mollify those who lack serious twitch skills. We're still hoping for the best.

What We Said: "*Spore* has amazing potential to become huge."
What We Saw: We were only slightly off the mark with our prediction—*Spore* has the potential to be gi-freaking-normous. The in-depth demos we enjoyed revealed a game breathtaking in its sweep, mind-boggling in its ambition, and infuriatingly far off until complete. But we'll wait. Just don't expect us to be patient.

What We Said: "It's clobberin' time."
What We Saw: As last month's cover story showed, this stand-alone sequel to *City of Heroes* is a massive undertaking. New zones, supergroup bases, and PVP battles should add up to an even more rewarding superhero role-playing experience.

TIMESHIFT

What We Said: "The notion of blending TiVo-ish time-shifting features into a first-person shooter [is a great twist on the genre]."
What We Saw: While it could have been used as a *Prince of Persia*–style panic button, your time-shifting suit instead gives you a lot more options, offering creative ways to mow down enemies and help clear areas. It also doesn't hurt that the game looks as sharp as a steam-powered Ginsu.

RISE & FALL: CIVILIZATIONS AT WAR

What We Said: "*Rise & Fall* is the kind of deep, rich strategy game that PC gamers live for."
What We Saw: Traditional RTS gameplay goes together with third-person action like peanut butter with chocolate—and trust us...it's not just some cheap gimmick. *Rise & Fall* could be the herald of a dynamic new era in RTS design.

MAGE KNIGHT: APOCALYPSE

What We Said: "Besides the new options [for playable races] and slick graphics, there are other big pushes...like a lot more emphasis on action and leaving stat juggling in the background."
What We Saw: Demoed in the shadow of a huge *Hellgate: London* pavilion, this game held its own...and looked good in the process. Those tired of waiting for *Diablo III* to surface should keep an eye on this *Gauntlet*-esque action-RPG.

TITAN QUEST

What We Said: "*Titan Quest* is an extraordinarily nice-looking game."
What We Saw: The big goal with *Titan Quest*, according to designer Brian Sullivan, is to give it an exciting, epic cinematic feel. What we saw at E3 was quite thrilling indeed, with cool, next-generation *Diablo*-style gameplay.

What We Said: "*Oblivion* might be another classic RPG."
What We Saw: Our pre-E3 assessment hinged on Bethesda addressing the shortcomings of *Morrowind*: weakish combat, generic dialogue, a lack of focus, and unrewarding stealth. What we saw at E3 addressed most of our worries: Dialogue is improved, and quests are more focused. Combat seems about the same—but it sure looks amazing. A single-player RPG? Gimme.

>> but word has it that the so-called "Hot Coffee" mod unlocks a hidden sex scene that's already on the game disc. >> German Director Uwe Boll is >>

PHANTASY STAR ONLINE: BLUE BURST

What We Said: "*Phantasy Star* is coming to the PC? It's about phreakin' time!"
What We Saw: Higher resolutions make Sonic Team's colorful worlds and characters look that much prettier. *PSO* is as addictive as ever; while it's still most at home with a gamepad, it is surprisingly playable with mouse and keyboard controls.

THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE: SHADOWS OF ANGMAR

What We Said: "We have one burning question: Does anyone really care?"
What We Saw: The game formerly known as *Middle-earth Online* attempts to provide a fiction-heavy experience that *LOTR*-savvy MMO fans should dig. But, as with all licensed MMOs, what fun is it when you're a nobody? We want to be Gandalf or Aragorn, not John Wayne Hobbit.

DREAMFALL: THE LONGEST JOURNEY

What We Said: "We love *The Longest Journey*, but the sequel has us worried."
What We Saw: The three Lara Croft–esque playable characters confirm the de-*Myst*-ification we suspected, but all the grandeur of classic adventures still seems to linger. We're still not sold on that combat stuff, though.

VANGUARD: SAGA OF HEROES

What We Said: "We need to see for ourselves what makes *Vanguard* different from everything else."
What We Saw: We now know what makes it different—it's the most ambitious MMORPG ever, which is its salvation or doom. Covering traditional adventuring, crafting, diplomacy, exploration, and so much more, *Vanguard*'s design doc must be big enough to stun an ox. But is it too big?

AGE OF EMPIRES III

What We Said: "Rather than acting as yet another carbon copy of its forebear, *AOE3* introduces some new gameplay elements."
What We Saw: *AOE3* is the series' first 3D title, and while that's hardly a revolutionary element, its impact on the game is undeniable. In general, it seems Ensemble hasn't tried to fix what wasn't broken—thankfully. (Check out our exclusive hands-on preview of *AOE3* page TK.)

CALL OF DUTY 2

What We Said: "Why is it we are so excited about *COD2*? The gameplay."
What We Saw: Death porn. That sounds harsh, but more than one of us was disturbed by the *COD2* D-Day demo shown at E3. We understand the desire for authenticity, but this felt like it was reveling in death and destruction. We're hoping the finished product makes us *feel* less icky than the demo did, though the game *looks* great—for a look at exclusive new screens, turn to page TK.

STAR WARS EMPIRE AT WAR

What We Said: "Yeah, we know that previous *Star Wars* RTS efforts have been mediocre, but our hopes are still high."
What We Saw: After getting a good look at *Empire at War*, we were impressed by the in-game battles, which seemed appropriately larger than life and incredibly detailed. Well, either that or we were still on a high from seeing Darth Vader back in theaters, kicking ass old-school style.

AGE OF CONAN: HYBORIAN ADVENTURES

What We Said: "Funcom hopes that by getting players acclimated to the game offline, the MMO experience will be less daunting and more dynamic."
What We Saw: A single-player RPG that turns into an MMO adventure after level 20? It sounds ingenious, looks damn impressive, and is true to the Conan lore—expect a full onscreen abattoir. Definitely not just another MMO, *Age of Conan* is one to watch.

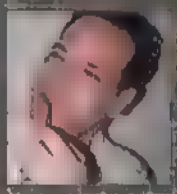
CGW @ E3 2005

The editors sound off about this year's show

JEFF GREEN
It was a great E3 for PC gaming, and I'm not just saying that because it's my job. *Spore*, *AOE3*, *Prey*, and *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* were amongst the best games of the show, on any platform. I hate E3. E3 sucks. I wish it would go away forever. But this year I loved it.

ROBERT COFFEY
While E3 was nasty—tons of people with questionable hygiene made even more questionable thanks to no air conditioning—it was great nonetheless. For me, this year was all about games I hadn't known much about beforehand, like *Prey* and *Spore*. I also liked Creative's X-Fi technology (see page 82 for more on X-Fi), which is going to make gamers stop taking sound for granted.

KRISTEN SALVATORE
This was by far the most crowded E3 I've attended. In terms of getting around and finding food, and the proximity of sweaty bodies with which I am not interested in becoming familiar, that was a bad, bad thing. In terms of the health of our industry and the wealth of great games to look forward to, it was nothing short of kick-ass.



DARREN GLADSTONE
This was a year of bona fide surprises. Who cares about the PS3 and Xbox 360 when we've got *Spore*, the most revolutionary game I've seen since...well, *The Sims*? Top that off with new games such as *UT 2007*, *Huxley*, and *Quake Wars*, and 2006 is already looking hot.

RYAN SCOTT
One thing never changes: E3 makes my feet hurt. But even with the legwork, the show is always a blast. My favorite game of E3 had to be *Titan Quest*. I know everybody's hot and bothered for *Diablo III*, but, man, does this game look awesome!

>> at it again, working on *Dungeon Siege*, the movie. Strangely, some big stars have signed on—including Burt Reynolds and Ron Perlman. >>

AUTO ASSAULT

What We Said: "Hopefully, you won't need a mechanic to figure everything out."
What We Saw: We have every reason to believe that *Auto Assault* will be just as amazing as...pretty much everything else NCsoft has published. As for the number-heavy item statistics we're so concerned about, developer NetDevil assures us it's all being taken care of.

IMPERATOR

What We Said: "*[Imperator]* could be a serious contender once it's finished."
What We Saw: This game is looking way better now that it's getting further along. Mythic is setting up a really solid tactical environment here, with the goal of making you feel like you're in the middle of a war. If it ends up being the easy-to-pick-up experience it's touted as, we're psyched.

THE MOVIES

What We Said: "We aren't completely sold on the 'make your own movie' premise."
What We Saw: Make movies, save them as AVI files, and share them on the Internet. It's actually *genius*. Sure, we'll give the *Sims*-esque sandbox mode a whirl, but look out Tarantino—that screenplay in our closet is about to get green-lighted. Uh, if the game would come out already.

FABLE: THE LOST CHAPTERS

What We Said: "*The Lost Chapters* is a tantalizing treat."
What We Saw: No, it won't change your mind or fulfill the ambition of the original Xbox version, but it will satisfy hungry action-RPG fans. Playing with a mouse brings a new approach to fighting, and a good deal of new content helps to flesh out the story significantly.

BLACK & WHITE 2

What We Said: "*Black & White 2* needs to be a whole lot better than the original."
What We Saw: Thankfully, it looks like *Black & White 2* will indeed be a whole lot better. The game has retained the charm and central premise of the original while fleshing out the actual "game" part of the game. With the tedium gone, better creature A.I., and improved combat, *Black & White 2* is moving up our must-play list.

E3 SURPRISES

ALAN WAKE

PUBLISHER: TBA DEVELOPER: Remedy
RELEASE DATE: TBA

The guys behind *Max Payne* are cooking up a new psychological thriller titled *Alan Wake*, in which you portray a horror novelist whose best-selling, nightmare-influenced books have come to life. We saw little more than a tech demo—but given Remedy's track record, we're excited.

BROTHERS IN ARMS: EARNED IN BLOOD

PUBLISHER: Ubisoft DEVELOPER: Gearbox
RELEASE DATE: Q3 2005

Earned in Blood may seem rushed, but we're assured that it has been in development for a while. Gearbox has taken a note from its first professional game, *Half-Life: Opposing Force*: You'll play through the timeline of the original *Brothers in Arms* from another soldier's perspective, briefly intersecting with some of the missions you ran through in that game.

ENEMY TERRITORY: QUAKE WARS

PUBLISHER: Activision DEVELOPER: Splash Damage
RELEASE DATE: TBA

Unlike the original, freely downloadable *Enemy Territory*, *Quake Wars* is a fully featured retail product. Deathmatch junkies will feel right at home in this online tactical shooter, which takes place in continuity just before *Quake II*. We've got some big scoops on this one coming down the road—stay tuned.

INDIGO PROPHECY

PUBLISHER: Atari DEVELOPER: Quantic Dream
RELEASE DATE: September 2005

Indigo what? The game formerly known as *Fahrenheit* is coming to the United States, and it's the most promising adventure game we've seen in a while. The game's big push is to really make you feel as though you're part of an interactive cinematic experience; it blends action with adventure, and the story progression changes depending on your actions.

HUXLEY

PUBLISHER: Webzen DEVELOPER: Webzen
RELEASE DATE: Q3 2006

Webzen's *Huxley* looks like a promising—and gritty—postapocalyptic urban-warfare game in which your actions actually impact the world. Everything that you succeed at not only benefits you (new weaponry, stat and skill improvement), but becomes an online version of *Pay It Forward*—minus the bad acting.

>> Sega declares *Total War*! Having acquired The Creative Assembly, Sega will now be publishing all *Total War* games and expansions. /

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RP Visit www.esrb.org for updated rating information.

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BOOK

Da Gospel According to Ali G

$13 AMAZON.COM

In honor of *GTA: San Andreas* coming to the PC, it's time to get street, yo. Ya seen Ali G on da HBO talkie show? GOOD! While waiting to buy the second season DVDs, why not big up yo'self and buy Ali G's new book? Respeck! (And if this didn't make sense, buy the first season of the HBO show on DVD right now.)

MUSIC

Spoon: Gimme Fiction

$13 AMAZON.COM

Featuring a bunch of infectious songs that bounce around in your cranium, Spoon's new CD is unfortunately over in less than 46 minutes...but what an awesome 45 minutes it is. Starting strong with "The Beast and Dragon, Adored," Spoon channels the spirit of John Lennon and takes it from there. If you want a taste of good indie rock, this is it.

DVD

Kung Fu Hustle

$20 AMAZON.COM

Stephen Chow is a genius. Take kung fu ass-kickery and mix it with a *Road Runner* cartoon and you've got the idea of what's here. If you haven't seen *Shaolin Soccer*, that's fine. But if you missed this flick when it blew through theaters like a martial arts hurricane, check out the DVD. No excuses!

STUDY AIDS

Slang Flash Cards

$16 URBANOUTFITTERS.COM

Need a grip of games? Are you a playa hater? Does Jeff or Robert have any idea what we're talking about? Probably not. That's why we're happy to supply them with these street study guides, so they only feel remotely out of it when trying to relate to "tha kids."

MUSIC

Z-Trip: Shifting Gears

$11 AMAZON.COM

We've appreciated the genius of DJ Z-Trip for some time now. He was the king of mash-ups before they became MTV's flavor of the month; and his *Uneasy Listening* and *Live From L.A.* bootleg discs are ingenious mixes of rock and hip-hop tracks. This new disc, true to its name, is a major shift. And it rules.

PULP

Green Lantern

$3.00

DCCOMICS.COM

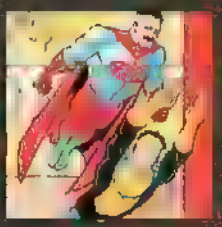
Hal Jordan is back, baby! Pardon this fanboy moment, but the quintessential Green Lantern, the emerald pimp, is literally back from the dead. The guy you may remember from *Superfriends* is getting a reboot thanks to the writing of Geoff Johns, and he's off to a good start. We've already seen GL pimp-slap Batman—and that was even before issue #1 hit stands!

MUSIC

Eels: Blinking Lights and Other Revelations

$14 AMAZON.COM

In the Eels' best, most fourth album in a long time, *Blinking Lights* gives you a taste of life and loss from the beginning in "From Which I Came/A Magic World." This two-disc set is a little moody, but if you need to take it down a few notches after getting frustrated by *Pariah*, press play.



PULP

Invincible: Family Matters

$9.50

AMAZON.COM

Mark Grayson doesn't need to wait until all the Marvel games come out to be a superhero. He always knew that he was going to be one; after all, his father is the most powerful guy on the planet. Mark's just been waiting for his own abilities to kick in. Follow Mark's senior year in high school as he starts coming of age in this collection of the first few issues.

POCKET CHANGE: $50

PIPELINE

Save some money for these upcoming games

AUGUST 2005	PUBLISHER
187 Ride or Die	Ubisoft
Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth	2K Games
Dungeon Siege II	Microsoft
F.E.A.R.	VU Games
Jaws Unleashed	Majesco
Madden NFL 06	EA Sports
MotoGP 3	THQ
Namco Museum 50th Anniversary Arcade Collection	Namco
The Sims 2: Nightlife	EA Games
[redacted]	
Dreamfall: The Longest Journey	Funcom
EverQuest II: Desert of Flames	SOE
Indigo Prophecy	Atari
LOTR Online: Shadows of Angmar	Turbine
Origin of the Species	Tri Synergy
Playboy: The Mansion—Private Party	Hip Games
Rainbow Six: Lockdown	Ub[redacted]
Scarface	VU Games
Seven Kingdoms: Conquest	Enlight
The Suffering: Ties That Bind	Midway
UFO: Extraterrestrials	Tri Synergy
OCTOBER 2005	
City of Villains	NCsoft
Rise & Fall	Midway
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.	THQ
The Godfather	EA Games
Gods & Heroes	Perpetual
The Movies	Activision
TimeShift	Atari
SUMMER/FALL 2005	
Blitzkrieg II	CDV Software
Brothers In Arms: Earned in Blood	Ubisoft
Call of Duty 2	Activision
Chicken Little	Buena Vista
Commandos Strike Force	Eidos
Earth 2160	Zuxxez
El Matador	Conega
Evil Dead: Regeneration	THQ
Ghost Recon 3	Ubisoft
Hitman: Blood Money	Eidos
Law & Order: Criminal Intent	VU Games
Myst V: End of Ages	Ubisoft
Rome: Total War—Barbarian Invasion	Activision
The Roots	Conega
Stacked	Mycin Media
Stubbs the Zombie	Aspyr
UFO: Aftershock	Conega
World Racing 2	TDK
Worms 4: Mayhem	Codemasters
X3: Reunion	Enlight

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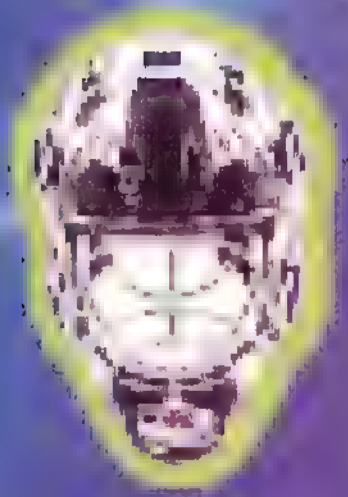

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AGE OF EM

PUBLISHER: Microsoft Game Studios DEVELOPER: Ensemble Studios GENRE: RTS RELEASE DATE: Winter 2005

The definitive RTS gets redefined. We tell you how

WORLD-EXCLUSIVE SCREENS AND DETAILS

THERE'S A GOOD CHANCE YOU'RE CURIOUS ABOUT *AGE OF EMPIRES III*. To date, nearly 16 million copies of the historically based real-time strategy franchise have been sold to gamers everywhere. And while some dedicated gamers are still happily gathering resources, establishing trade routes, and skirmishing among the stone-age tribes and conquerors of the first two *AOEs*, many more are ready to travel to the New World, meet new people...and destroy them.

Age of Empires III doesn't alter what's been working well for years (see Old World sidebar below), but it does introduce some significant new features that affect gameplay (for an overview, see the New World sidebar below). During our exclusive playtest and interview with lead programmer Dave Pottinger, producer David Rippy, lead designer Greg Street, and senior designer Bruce Shelley, we learned exactly how those features work—and how they're redefining this definitive RTS. / **Jeff Green**

OLD WORLD

- **SAME GOAL AS THE REST OF THE FRANCHISE:** Explore the map, gather resources, build a civilization, and destroy everyone else.
- **SAME ORGANIZATION:** There's a single-player campaign, a single-player skirmish mode, and multiplayer.
- **STORY LINE:** It directly follows *AOE2*'s, beginning in the 1500s; focuses on the European "discovery" and colonization of the New World; and ends just before the start of the Civil War.
- **EIGHT PLAYABLE CIVILIZATIONS:** Spanish, British, French, Portuguese, Dutch, German, Russian, and Ottoman. (See page 51 for more on the civilizations.)
- **FIVE AGES (YES, FIVE):** discovery, colonial, fortress, industrial, and imperial. Why five instead of the usual four? To break late-game stalemates.

PIRES III

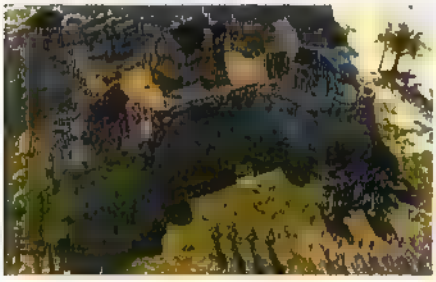
NEW WORLD

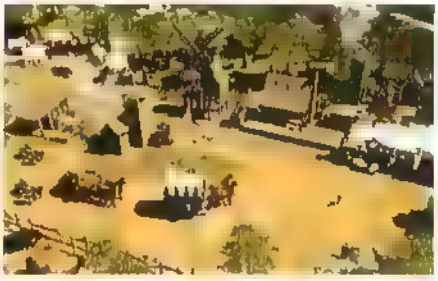
- **THE HOME CITY:** In multiplayer and skirmish modes, all civilizations have a home city that supplies resources and levels up according to players' success on the maps. The home city is persistent from game to game. (page 48)
- **SKIRMISH MODE** (aka random maps): A.I. opponents are now well-developed "characters" with deep strategies, motivations, and personalities—and more than 4,000 audio taunts at their disposal. (page 50)
- **NATIVE AMERICANS:** Not a playable civilization, but they ally with playable civs, putting their technologies and resources at that civ's disposal. Only Native American military units allied with a playable civ can be killed; villages are not attackable. (page 50)
- **GRAPHICS AND PHYSICS:** This first 3D iteration of the series uses bump- and tone-mapping to render realistic water and shadows, and the Havok engine's cause-and-effect physics bring battles to lurid life. (page 52)

46
50
52

THE HOME CITY

Ensemble adds some RPG to *AOE3*





BY FAR, *AOE3*'S BIGGEST INNOVATION IS THE home city, which brings an element of persistence to both your single- and multiplayer games and adds a ton of new strategy to the mix.

It works like this: When you first start the game in skirmish or multiplayer mode, you choose to play as one of eight civilizations, each of which has a home city. (See page 50 for details on skirmish mode and the eight civilizations.) The home city represents your HQ back in Europe—for example, if you're playing as Spain, your home city is Seville. While your conquistadors are off in the New World, Seville is supporting their endeavors with shipments of resources, civilians, technology, and military units that you specify and send so that they show up on the New World map while you're playing. In return, your exploits in the New World—everything from shooting bears to building structures—gain you XP that allow you to level up your home city...which in turn opens up opportunities for new, better shipments to your New World minions, and more opportunities to make those shipments.

AGE OF EMPIREQUEST

Think of the home city as an RPG character. In an RPG, the first thing you do is create a character; here, you name your town. In an RPG, the more you play, the more your character levels up; here, the more you play, the more your city levels up. As it does, you get access to upgrades and customization options (tweaks to architecture, different units, texture tweaks), but more important, leveling up affects the type and number of shipments you can send. Just like in an RPG, there are more powerful things deeper in the tech tree—you can send some shipments at level 20 that weren't available to you in level 10. You can send shipments every few minutes (the better you play, the less waiting time between sending opportunities), and the number of shipments you can make increases as you level up.

> More than anything, the home city affects players' strategies—how they're used can turn the tide of a game.

You begin with 12 possible shipments. You may use one on something you send once, such as a technology, while you use a bunch of them on something you send repeatedly, like villagers. At the end of the game, if you have sufficient XP, you level up and can choose an additional shipment to add to your arsenal. In the next game, you'll have 13 shipment options instead of 12. Developer Ensemble is guessing that a grand total of 100 potential shipments will become available to players who have established a fully developed home city, but the limit for use in any given game is 20. That's the point at which you'll have to start making choices before each game: Which 20 shipments do you want to bring in? Says Shelley, "It's kind of like building different *Magic: The Gathering* decks. If I'm playing this guy and he favors one strategy, I'll play a particular city with a particular set of shipments because they're particularly good against what I think he's going to do."

In practice, you can play and level up as many home cities as you choose, though Ensemble believes the typical player will probably have one city per civilization. A particularly hardcore player, though, might have 20 home cities with different build-outs—three for each civilization. Home cities are also separate for single- and multiplayer games, with level disparities handled by restrictions aimed at keeping things fair and focused on strategy. Decks will be "tiered" by level, so that, for example, any cards you receive from levels 0 through 9 will make a tier 1 deck. Levels 10-25 will be tier 2, and so on. If you have a deck with even a single tier 3 card, then you have a tier 3 deck. And you can only play a tier 3 deck against other tier 3 players. So a guy with a level 50 home city can play a level 1 newbie—but he can only use cards available at the lowest levels. "It's not like *World of WarCraft*," says Street, "where if I'm level 30 and you're level 35 I have no chance against you."

CHOICE STRATEGIES

More than anything, the home city affects players' strategies—what shipments are sent and when they're sent can turn the tide of a game. Looking to win with a booming economy? Focus your shipment choices on villagers, food, and technologies that will help to improve your colony. Seeking a military rush victory? Be sure you've got shipments that let you send in the cavalry and be ready to send in army units when your opponents don't expect it. Defending against a military rush? Consider "saving up" shipments so you have emergency supplies in case of attack.

Despite the RPG analogy, Street is quick to point out that *Age of Empires III* "is still an RTS, and skill really matters. If you squander your shipments or get attacked really early or something, it's still possible for someone who's much more skilled than you to win, even at a lower level. An RTS is about high-level choice. It's about reacting to what another player does, not having a system where 14 games ago you got this technology that I didn't get and now, because of the map we picked, I'm probably going to lose as soon as the game starts."

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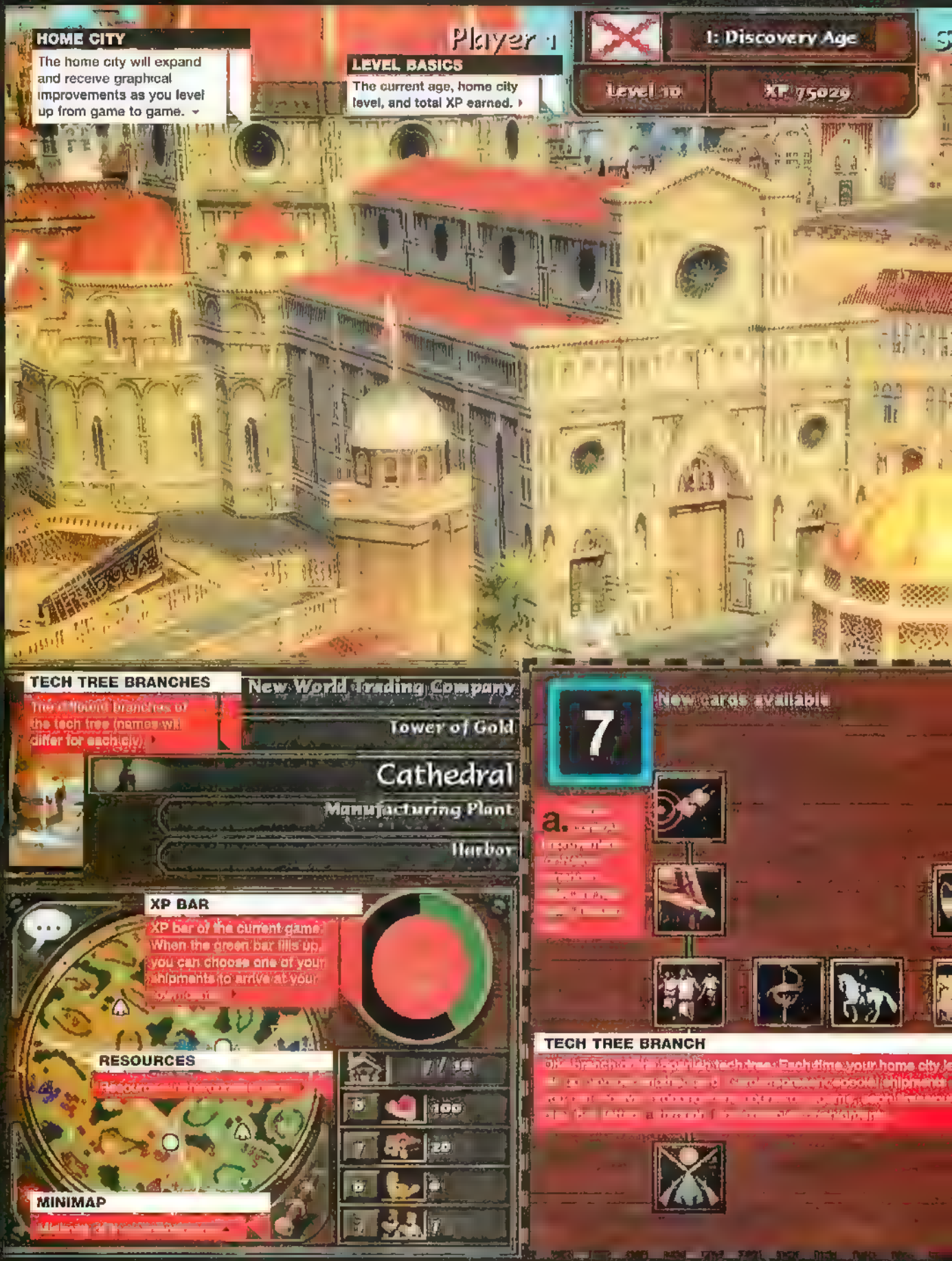
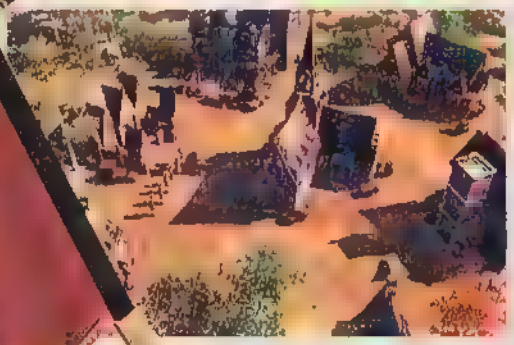
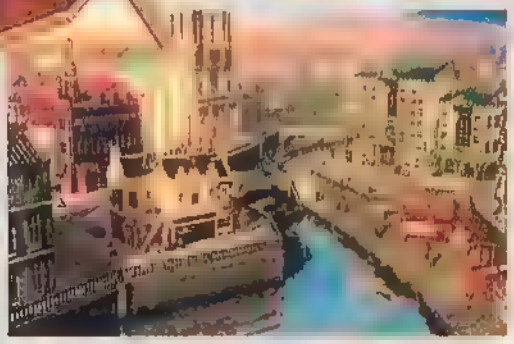

HOME CITY
The home city will expand and receive graphical improvements as you level up from game to game.
Player 1
LEVEL BASICS
The current age, home city level, and total XP earned.
1: Discovery Age
Level 10
XP 75029
TECH TREE BRANCHES
The 3 tech tree branches of the tech tree (names will differ for each civ)
New World Trading Company
Tower of Gold
Cathedral
Manufacturing Plant
Harbor
7
New cards available
a.
XP BAR
XP bar of the current game. When the green bar fills up, you can choose one of your shipments to arrive at your
RESOURCES
100
20
MINIMAP
TECH TREE BRANCH



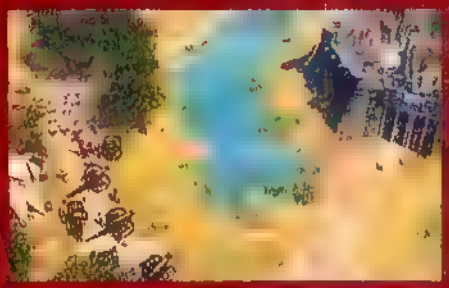


> HOME CITY

HERE'S A GUIDE TO ONE PORTION OF THE TECH TREE YOU SEE IF YOUR HOME CITY IS SEVILLE, SPAIN. YOU SWAP FROM THE MAIN GAME TO THIS SCREEN TO CONTROL YOUR HOME CITY'S ACTIONS (THIS PAUSES THE GAME IN SINGLE PLAYER, BUT NOT IN MULTIPLAYER). HOW IMPORTANT IS THE HOME CITY? FOR EXAMPLE, YOU CAN BUILD A TOWN CENTER ONLY BY SENDING A "COVERED WAGON" SHIPMENT FROM YOUR HOME CITY TO YOUR EXPLORERS IN THE NEW WORLD.

SKIRMISH MODE

A.I. with attitude



"[SKIRMISH MODE] IS THE MAIN THING THAT'S distinguished our games from everyone else's," says Shelley—and he's right. *Age of Empires* was the first real-time strategy game to give players the opportunity to compete against the computer A.I. on randomly generated maps, essentially mimicking the structure of a multiplayer game. Even today, the challenges inherent in making random maps that the A.I. can play on intelligently—and that players feel are fair—are just too great for most companies.

Blizzard, for example, never includes random maps; everything in *WarCraft* is always hand painted. Shelley explains the difference this way: "[Blizzard] is building chess games [in *WarCraft* and *StarCraft*] for competition. One guy at Blizzard said we wouldn't believe the amount of e-mail they get from competitive players saying stuff like, 'If you would just move that item two pixels south it'd balance the map.' We're building a poker game, where every hand, you don't know what you've got until you pull up your cards."

AOE3's big, new skirmish mode feature is the inclusion of eight computer-player personas, one for each civilization—Napoleon for France, Queen Isabella for Spain, and so on (see page 51). Every A.I. opponent will have different strategies, motivations, and personalities.

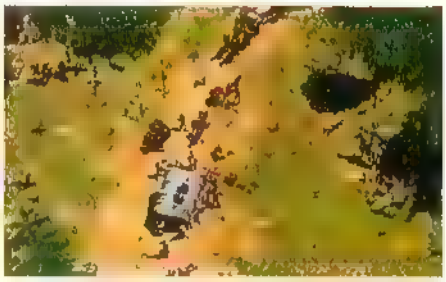
"We wanted to beef up the feeling that you're playing against a persona, not a bunch of bits calculating the most optimal way to attack you," says Street.

One way they'll do this is with audio taunts—there are about 4,000 at this point—that will chime in at key moments in recognition of what's happening in the game. *Age of Mythology* included text taunts from the A.I., but with *AOE3*'s multiple audible personalities, it's much more amped up this time around.

"A really cool thing is for the A.I. to tell you what to do," says Pottinger. "Let's say that as Napoleon is marching across the map, he says 'I'm on my way to kick your ass.' That's cool. Why? It creates a time line and some tension, because you know that in a couple minutes, this big Napoleonic army is coming to your town. That's a lot more fun than just having 40 cuirassiers show up."

NATIVE AMERICANS

PC meets PC



THE NEW WORLD, OF COURSE, WASN'T NEW TO everyone, and Ensemble knew from the start that Native Americans would play an important role in the game. They do, but not as a playable civilization.

"There are Native American towns on maps, and it's up to you to go discover them and forge alliances with them," says Street. You forge those alliances by building trading posts near Native American villages (and you break other civilizations' alliances by destroying their trading posts). Once you form an alliance with a tribe, you can use its units and technologies, along with those of your own civilization. So, for example, if you are playing as the French and you ally with the Iroquois, you now have access to French and Iroquois soldiers and knowledge. "They're kind of like plug-ins," Street explains. "They're an additional civ that you can plug into your main one to get extra abilities."

Strategically, this adds an interesting new dimension to the game. Native American alliances cost no population spots because you needn't provide them with food and shelter, as you would your own units. Nearing your population limit and short on warriors? If you're allied with a nearby Native American tribe, you have their warriors at your disposal with no hit to your population limit or resources. And as you advance, your indigenous allied friends get additional units and technologies.

> In a game about the colonization of America, deciding how to portray Native Americans is especially difficult.

What they won't ever get is attacked: Native American units are treated as opponents only when they're allied with another civilization, and then, only their military units can be attacked. For example, if you are playing against the British, who are allied with the Comanche, you can attack Comanche military units—never Comanche villages themselves. If no alliances are in place, Native Americans aren't attackable at all.

Ensemble and Microsoft admit that in making a game about the European colonization of America, deciding how to portray Native Americans was difficult. It seemed that no matter how they were represented—or even what they were called—somebody was going to be unhappy. Native American groups themselves couldn't agree on what Ensemble should do. Microsoft conducted meetings with representatives of different tribes, but according to Ensemble president Tony Goodman, "it was impossible to get consensus on any issue. There was no topic that they as a collective group agreed upon." Some tribal representatives felt the same way as many at Ensemble: Native Americans should be a playable civilization. Others wanted them in the game, but to be unkillable. And the debate over naming ranged from Native American to First Peoples to Indigenous Peoples to...well, Indians.

Ultimately, it came down to gameplay. "We knew what we wanted from a gameplay standpoint," says Rippy. "We did everything we could to make it politically correct, but we didn't let that drive the design. Fun trumps history."

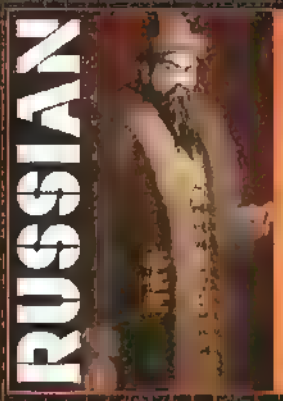
8 CIVILIZATIONS

AOE3's playable civs, and the corresponding skirmish mode A.I. opponents

BRITISH

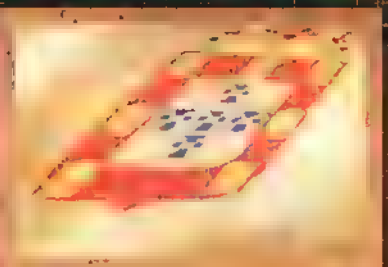
HOME CITY: London
CIV BONUS: Manor house gives quick access to settlers
UNIQUE UNITS: Longbowman, rocket
A.I. OPPONENT: Queen Elizabeth

RUSSIAN



HOME CITY: Moscow
CIV BONUS: Start with extra resources, can train infantry in batches
UNIQUE UNITS: Cossack, streltsi, oprichnik
A.I. OPPONENT: Ivan the Terrible

PORTUGUESE



HOME CITY: Lisbon
CIV BONUS: Start with two town centers, strong navy, best dragoons in game
UNIQUE UNITS: Cacadore
A.I. OPPONENT: Prince Henry the Navigator

FRENCH

HOME CITY: Paris
CIV BONUS: Coureurs ("supervillagers"); easier to form alliances with Native Americans
UNIQUE UNITS: Coureur, cuirassier
A.I. OPPONENT: Napoleon Bonaparte

DUTCH

HOME CITY: Amsterdam
CIV BONUS: Banks generate coin automatically
UNIQUE UNITS: Envoy, reiter, fluyt
A.I. OPPONENT: Maurice of Orange

GERMAN

HOME CITY: Berlin
CIV BONUS: Settler wagon and uhlan cavalry spawn free from town center
UNIQUE UNITS: Uhlan, settler wagon, doppelsoldner
A.I. OPPONENT: Frederick the Great

OTTOMAN

HOME CITY: Constantinople
CIV BONUS: Town centers produce settlers automatically, more unique units
UNIQUE UNITS: Abus gun, Janissary, spahi, galley, great bombard
A.I. OPPONENT: Suleiman the Magnificent

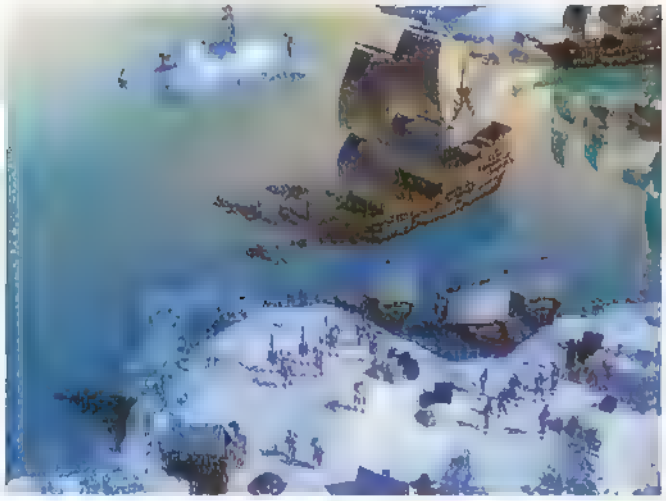
SPANISH

HOME CITY: Seville
CIV BONUS: Faster home-city shipments
UNIQUE UNITS: Redolero, lancer wardog
A.I. OPPONENT: Queen Isabella

▲ Rag-doll physics mean that battles come alive with bodies flying and falling in a realistic fashion.

GRAPHICS & PHYSICS

Realism and details never seen before in an RTS



▲ Outstrips even Thomas Kinkade, Painter of Light™.

▲ High dynamic range lighting makes for vibrant, realistic scenes.

ONE OF THE MOST OBVIOUS INNOVATIONS comes in the form of *AOE3*'s graphics and physics. "I think one of the things that invigorated the genre is the graphics," says Street. "We could finally do some of the things that first-person shooters and RPGs have been doing for a while. We don't have to tell the artists, 'Oh, you can't put that unit in the game, it has too many polys' or 'We can't have shadows casting under shadows because the game will crash.' It's been nice not to tell people that."

It turns out that the game's stellar look benefited from an Xbox 360 game that was scrapped. "There was a prototyped engine shown to Bill Gates," Shelley explains, "with lighting stuff that hadn't been in many games at that point—it was a 360 game. We decided to put some of our assets—essentially, the home city—into that engine to see what it looked like. When that game got canceled, it freed up really high-end art and graphics guys, and we saw it was a good opportunity to pull them in, and pull that technology in."

> One programmer's entire job was ensuring that water effects were portrayed realistically.

"That" technology reads like a laundry list of the best graphics tools out there: High dynamic range lighting makes scenes look more natural because it allows for the representation of the sun's beams bouncing off reflective surfaces. Bump-mapping and specular mapping mean that shiny substances like water and metal glisten as they should. One programmer's entire job was ensuring that water effects were portrayed realistically, with details like flotsam and jetsam, foam near the shore, and accurate water motion. And shadows are now "naturally" cast according to where the sun is. It all adds up to environments that are incredibly detailed and realistic looking.

That realism is also mirrored in physics effects. The Havok engine at work results in rag-doll physics that throw bodies during battles, and in structural damage that far more accurately mirrors the actual results of, say, a cannonball striking a building. Even the trees are physics enabled, so an errant cannonball can hit them and knock them down.

AT THE END OF OUR TIME TOGETHER, BRUCE Shelley reminds me that "[*CGW*] wrote about how the age of the RTS is dead, how *Age of Mythology* was the last great RTS game," (which we did, in our December 2002 cover story). "This has been a struggle for us: trying to innovate but [still] hold on to making an *Age* game." It's possible that after a full review of *Age of Empires III*, we may end up rescinding our earlier pronouncement—but for now, we can say that if the goal was innovation within the realm of the game we know and love, the *AOE3* team should already be celebrating its success. /

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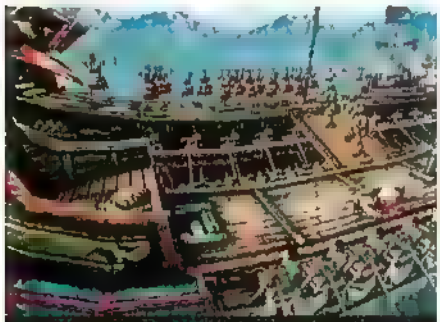
BIRTH OF A SUBGENRE

THE ACTION-RTS

Age of Empires III looks pretty incredible and delivers some great new takes on the old-school RTS...but sometimes, we'd like to stop playing "God" giving orders from up above and get our hands dirty with those peons down below. Over the years, a number of games have tried this—melding heady strategy with first-person, white-knuckled action—but they have been met with mixed commercial and critical success. Action-RTS games may finally take off in the next year, thanks to three new titles that promise to take this burgeoning genre in directions originally touched upon by games such as *Dungeon Keeper*, *Battlezone* (pictured above), and *Savage*. Here's a look at some of the action-RTS games you can look forward to in the coming months.

RISE & FALL: CIVILIZATIONS AT WAR

PUBLISHER: Midway DEVELOPER: Stainless Steel Studios RELEASE DATE: October 2005



OVERVIEW

Rick Goodman and the Stainless Steel Studios gang have made a good living by knowing both history and real-time strategy gaming. Goodman worked on the original *Age of Empires* and then formed Stainless Steel to create the ginormous *Empire Earth*. Of all the upcoming genre-bending strategy titles, *Rise & Fall* looks to stay the closest to its RTS roots...while throwing just the right amount of up-close-and-personal bloodshed into the mix. Unlike Goodman's previous works, *Rise & Fall* spans a "mere" 1,000 years and four empires. But what a 1,000 years they are—you can lead the Persian, Greek, Roman, and Egyptian empires to glory between 1,000 B.C. and A.D. 0.

THE ACTION

The real innovation is the way hero units are used. Once you build up enough stamina by pulling off successful tactics in strategy mode, you decide when you want to join the action, zooming down to ground level and fighting alongside the troops you were commanding from above. Using WASD commands as Alexander, for example, you can personally lead the charge into battle. Rally the troops, fire the first arrow (which you do from a first-person view), then run in swinging (which happens in third person).

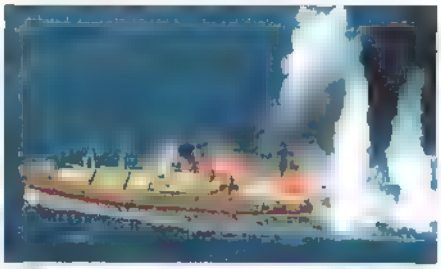
"First guy who makes a crack about that Bangles song is gonna get it..."

BELLS AND WHISTLES

Just in case you have a quibble with the way the scenarios are built, the game will ship with a built-in mapmaking tool. With it, you can create your own battles, focusing them on either tactics or action. So long as Goodman can make a game that's more "Ridley Scott epic" and less "Oliver Stone epic," we've got high hopes.

BATTLESTATIONS: MIDWAY

PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: Mithis Entertainment RELEASE DATE: February 2006



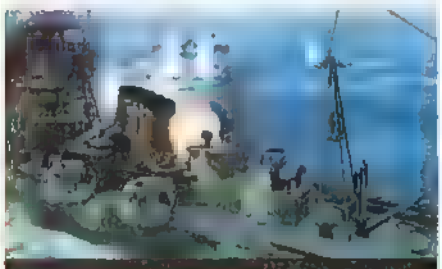
▲ Ship-to-ship combat looks particularly intense.

OVERVIEW

Battlestations: Midway has flown under the radar for some time now, so let's get some basic intel out of the way. As you can probably guess from the name, *Midway* takes place in the Pacific theater and has you playing as both the American and Japanese navies (you unlock the latter). Destroyers, aircraft carriers, subs, recon planes, bombers—you command about 70 craft in total (45 at a time in single-player mode). A solo campaign eases you into the higher ranks, but the basic premise is this: You direct where your fleet goes, and then you hop down to the ship/sub/plane level to do the dirty work.

THE ACTION

Whatever you have in your task force is instantly accessible, thanks to a simple bar along the top of the screen. Each craft handles uniquely with simple controls—this isn't a sim, after all. In seconds you're on a sub, sneaking behind enemy lines and sinking supply ships. Next you're jumping onto the bridge of a destroyer for a completely different experience. A simple onscreen indicator tells you how many of the ship's deck guns can be trained on the target in the crosshairs; as soon as you can, cross the T, unload with everything you've got and then go on a bombing run over the airfield.



BELLS AND WHISTLES

Midway also has a pretty cool multiplayer mode, with eight players jumping between available craft in pitched naval battles. In this mode, controls are split between four different "classes" in a sense. If you control the airfield, you're in charge of ordering and controlling its aircraft—the same goes for harbors under your command.

GHOST WARS

PUBLISHER: Hip Games DEVELOPER: Digital Reality RELEASE DATE: February 2006

▲ Looks like it's time for a little urban renewal, A10 style.

OVERVIEW

Digital Reality is setting its sights on modern warfare with *Ghost Wars*, which may be the most ambitious game yet in the burgeoning action-RTS genre. The best way to sum this game up in 20 words or less: It's a squad-based RTS with a huge focus on action scattered around the globe in modern combat operations. On the surface, the game actually looks a lot like Atari's *Act of War*. Great visuals (each vehicle is composed of about 2,500 polygons, and every character has about 3,700 polygons) are obvious from the screenshots, but there's a lot more happening here—as we witnessed firsthand during a playtest of a level set in Cuba.

THE ACTION

There's no micromanagement here—just asses that need kicking. Squad tactics are the focus, so you get to select your elite special-ops forces before embarking on a mission. After the drop, you'll direct troop movement as you would in any other RTS—the real difference becomes obvious in the field, where you can leap right into the action. Jump into the sniper and start targeting distant foes; move over to the assault trooper for some FPS action; take a tank for a spin and the game switches to third person as you blast your way through the streets. There are so many options here that you almost forget you're playing an RTS.

BELLS AND WHISTLES

Units sport A.I. that intelligently evaluates the situation. When you aren't giving orders, your troops will know well enough to run, crouch, and take cover. For example, we took control of a tank and trundled down the street into an ambush. We switched over to command mode, leaving the unit high and dry—and after a few seconds of taking damage, the tank actually retreated and returned fire!

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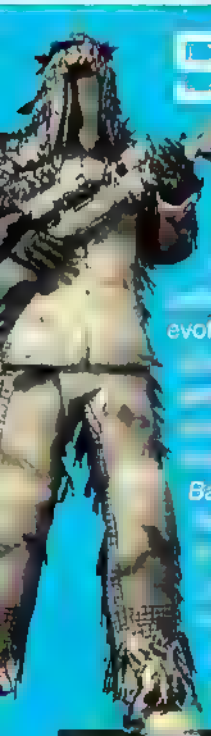


SHOOT TO THRILL

SOMETIMES, WE JUST WANT TO SHOOT STUFF—

means "each other." So it is with perfect timing that EA

evolution (despite what the outlandish system requirements might

Battlefield 2 is jumping in a helicopter and doing a nosedive into

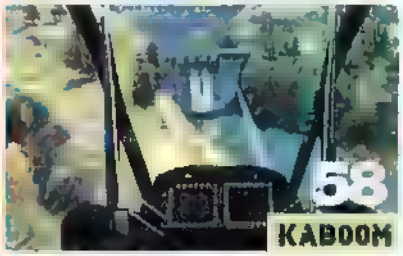
>>

REVIEW STANDARDS

Our review policy is simple: We review only final, gold, released-to-retail code, no betas or "near-final, reviewable" builds. We don't review patches, with the notable exception of those for online games like MMOs that autoupdate as a standard part of their operation. We do this so we are reviewing exactly what you, the consumer, are buying.

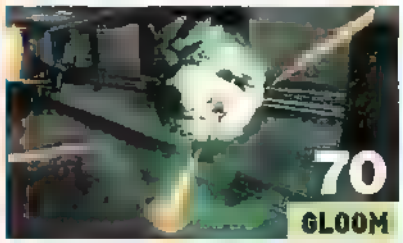
All games are rated on a simple five-star scale. One-star games are utter garbage, three-star games should appeal to die-hard fans of the genre, and the rare five-star game is an instant classic. Only the best games—receiving four and a half stars or better—are awarded an Editors' Choice.

INSIDE



Battlefield 2
Plane is upright = Ryan's not flying it.

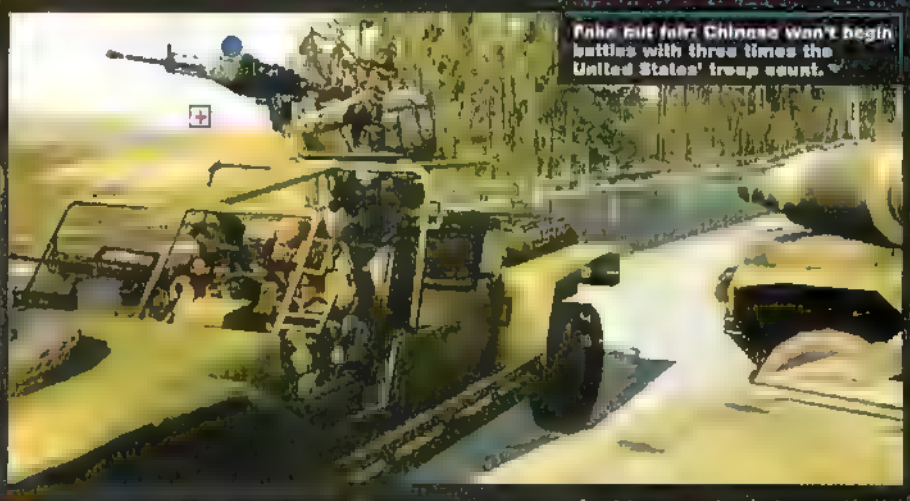
FlatOut
We bet you get to drive around a lot.



Pariah
So very aptly named...unfortunately.

PLAY IT! CHECK OUT THE DEMO ON THIS MONTH'S DVD

Buggies and other off-road vehicles absorb blasts over uneven terrain like rally cars do.



Take cut fair: Chinese won't begin battles with three times the United States' troop count.

BATTLEFIELD 2

EA detonates an explosively great sequel

WAR IS WAR. KILL OR BE KILLED AND, IN THE case of army-versus-army shooter *Battlefield 2*, fritter away the opposing force's stockpile of "tickets" (EA's slang for a team's cumulative spawn count) through simple attrition and stolen territory. But the weapons war is waged with change the way it's waged. *Battlefield 2*'s new technology (previous versions were set in World War II and Vietnam; this one is modern) calls for new tactics.

A hundred yards through cinder-block hovels lies our target: one market square on a zigzagging string leading to the Mideast Coalition's base. I proceed down the main strip in an M1 Abrams while my man on the .50 cal earns his danger pay scanning rooftops and waiting for a whoosh and the telltale trail of smoke pointing back to the shooter. Another tank and an APC in our convoy secure the intersections to keep the bad guys from mounting attacks through the side streets.

SERVICE DISTINCTIONS

The squad—a group of strangers, and not typical clan guys connected via a third-party program such as Teamspeak—can stick together and coordinate tight-knit strategy only because it's yammering via headset the whole time. Giving my gunner the heads up without taking my hands off the throttle to type some insensible, stressed-out shorthand would've worked well enough, but *Battlefield 2* does one better. Highlighted icons mark our positions on the map and in game, letting us count heads at a glance. And only squad members can hear combat chatter, so vital orders aren't lost in the 32-man hubbub. Of course, the tech and tactics work only when players are willing to use 'em, and some people won't be (for each one who is, there's another who isn't).

A spray of bullets walks up the side of our tank. More kick up lines along the wall at our left, and our gunners get down low behind their turrets (another nifty new feature). As squad leader, I radio our side's commander, asking for a torrent of artillery rounds, a flash scan from his eye-in-the-sky UAV, anything. Like the game's squad system, commander mode adds an essential element of global strategy. A smart chief—the engine in a well-oiled war machine—makes the battle. Ours is breaking it. And while mutiny is always an option, there's no promise that another a-hole won't take his place (see

Choppers are tough to get the hang of, but once you know how to fly, they get the job done.

Great idea, good implementation: BF2's TiVo-like "Battlecorder" captures your finest moments for later viewing.

Patch it, please: Suicide pilots score points for flying head-on into other planes. Why encourage nincompoops?

STATISTICALLY SPEAKING

So far, *Battlefield 2*'s rock-paper-scissors science seems sound.

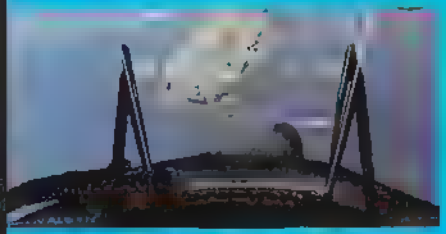
sidebar for samples of effective commanding).

The neat thing is that none of it—the chain of command, the elitist bands of E-brothers, the Patton-approved battle plans—needs to matter, at least to the curious weekend commando looking to pop into a public server and simply shoot somebody. Sometimes even career soldiers will want to say, "Screw it—fuhgedabout duty and stats and seesawing capture points," and then kamikaze a fast-flying MiG into his foe's carrier. Or stick C4 on fully crewed choppers in order to make fireworks over the open ocean. Or sprawl out and devote an hour to sniping passing pilots through their canopies, if only to show what one hell of a steady hand (and way too much free time) can do. Authenticity isn't beside the point—all hardware here is *Soldier of Fortune*-accurate—it just doesn't interfere with fun and fairness.

VOLUNTEER ARMY

Small-arms fire still pings off the Abrams' armor. The bad-guy infantry goes into a protective crouch as they duck and dart between buildings. I try to punch through until a missile alert goes off like a

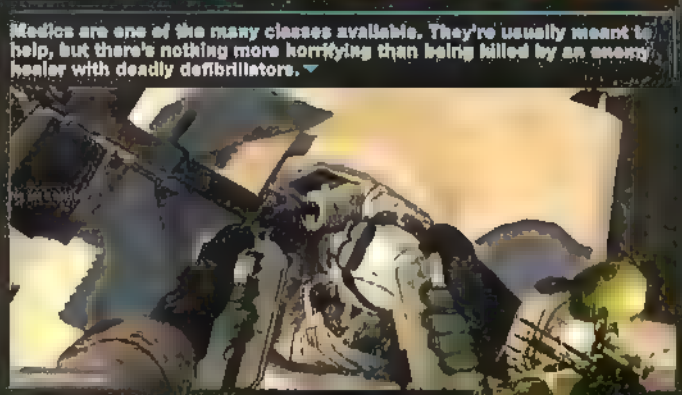
ON OUR DISC



Environments in the sequel are more expansive than ever before, but with up to 64 players running around simultaneously, it won't be hard to find yourself in the middle of an intense firefight.

Some commanders suck. Still, it's hard to blame *Battlefield 2* for human error.

Don't worry, most people *still* don't know how to properly fly aircraft.



Medics are one of the many classes available. They're usually meant to help, but there's nothing more horrifying than being killed by an enemy healer with deadly defibrillators.

A screaming alarm clock. I bang the snooze button, popping smoke grenades, six per side. Then nothing. He hoodwinked me into wasting my countermeasures so he could wire-guide his Predator home. Before I can hop out, I hear the parts clatter.

On foot, you'll feel rounds slap your Kevlar, but you can fire a few back before keeling over. In the sky, chaff and flares afford careless flyboys a second chance. It might take months to say for sure, but so far, *BF2*'s rock-paper-scissors science seems sound—more so than stealth-heavy *Vietnam*'s hide-and-seek, and maybe even more so than *1942*'s groundbreaking balance. This is warfare in an age of camera-guided hardware, but if developer DICE has learned a lesson with its iterations of the series, it's that hands-on know-how has to have its place, that too much "automatic" makes war hell instead of the helluva good time we all want. And it shows. Buggies slide sideways around corners, and gunships dart and fire down into the fray—wheeled or winged, vehicles here handle with finesse. But as with *1942*'s tricky Messerschmitts, mastering them takes more than an explanation of what does what. It takes skill and a sixth sense to know what works and when. It takes practice, and I'm only too happy to have more. / Shawn Elliott

Land, sea, and air war as you like it.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD | VERDICT ★★★★★

COMMAND AND CONQUER

With a competent commander calling the shots, *Battlefield 2* sizzles. As a commander (in which case competency isn't an issue, right?), it's a bloody riot. Regular supply drops, up-to-the-second recon, artillery support and how it boosts morale—that's all its own reward. There's more to the role than real-time strategy with live troops, though. A slightly self-serving leader, unafraid to

pounders touch down.

FIVE REASONS *BATTLEFIELD 2* ISN'T ALL IT CAN BE

EVEN 5-STAR GAMES HAVE THEIR NOTEWORTHY SNAFUS

1 [redacted]

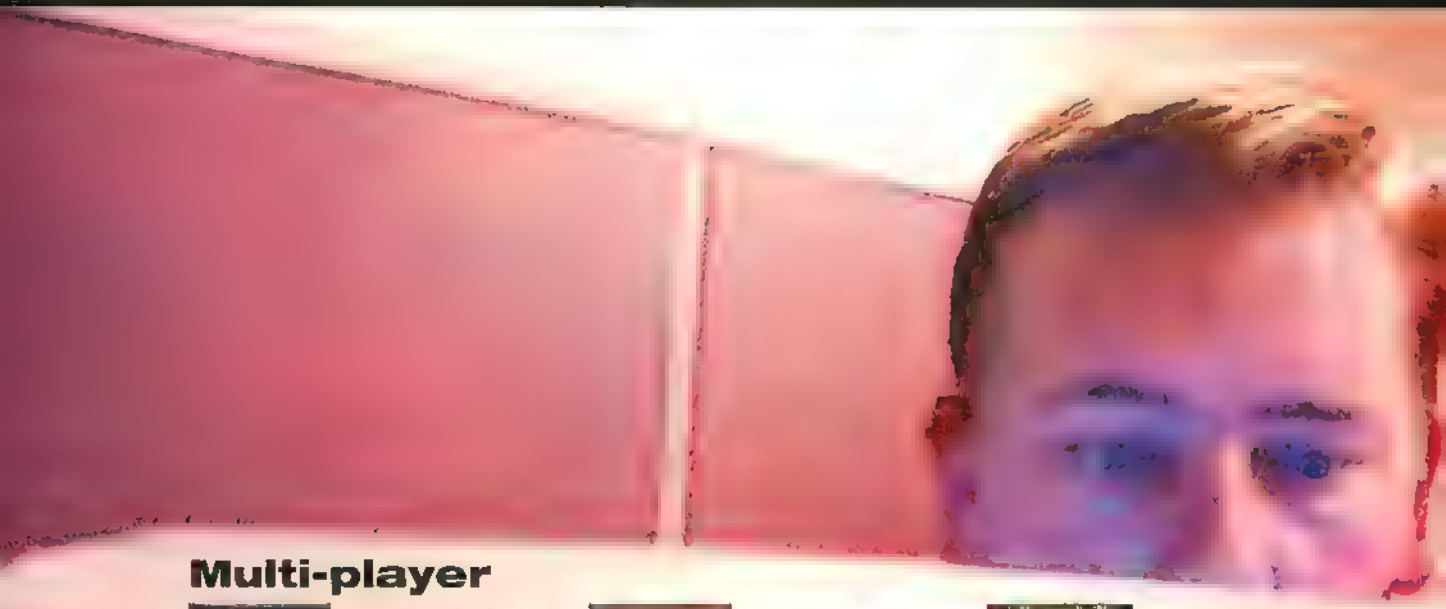
2 Sometimes the slightest scrape with friendly forces (e.g., touching a near-stationary tank) results in a KIA. Keep clear, forgive allies for innocent accidents and cross your fingers that they'll repay the courtesy.

3 *BF2* runs remarkably well on weaker rigs, but decreased draw distance puts players at a significant disadvantage.

4 The shadows go all wonky even on powerful PCs with maxed-out settings.

5 [redacted] next to the online mode.

You can play with others or play with yourself



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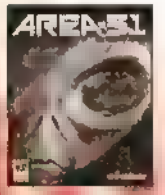

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Bullet-riddled corpses and over-the-top explosions are the norm in *San Andreas*.

THE TAO OF DJ POOH

HIP-HOP AUTEUR

DJ Pooh, who helped write *GTA: San Andreas*, cowrote the movie *Friday* and wrote and directed *The Wash*.

GRAND THEFT AUTO: SAN ANDREAS

Cross-platform crime spree

SAN ANDREAS IS ALL ABOUT DRIVIN' CARS and poppin' caps in the asses of unwary fools, but it could go to a Halloween ball as one of the most ambitious RPGs in recent memory. Sure, the game is set in a thinly veiled analogue of real-world California and Nevada, there's no magic, and the only dragons to be found are tattooed on the Chinese mafiosi who give you odd jobs. But look again: Underneath it all, *San Andreas* is a massive, *Morrowind*-scale undertaking.

In a decidedly *Boyz n the Hood*-esque game world populated with three major cities and a dozen tiny towns, you'll take on the role of smooth gangsta Carl "CJ" Johnson. Like traditional RPGs, *San Andreas* has plenty of guilds and factions (street gangs) to deal with, and you can form up a party (posse) and ride into combat (turf wars) or even visit a shop for better weapons and armor (machine guns and Kevlar vests). The story unfolds through quest strings, with plenty of side jobs to net you extra gold (er, dollars). And, of course, there are lots and lots of stats—strength, dexterity, etc.—tracked in obsessive detail as you build CJ from zero to hero.

Maybe this is why a game originally designed for consoles plays so well on the PC: At its heart, *San Andreas* treads the same territory that PC RPGs have been covering for years. It's *Baldur's Gate* with handguns...or if you prefer, *Dungeons & Dragons* starring a chaotic-neutral male human rogue with a predilection for carjacking—which is to say it isn't a perfect likeness. *San Andreas* offers immense freedom, but the average RPG enthusiast will likely find the core of the game far too restrictive and limiting for his or her tastes. The "meat" of the game is a series of largely linear missions that gradually unlock vehicles, weapons, areas, and more missions.

GRAND THEFT CUT-SCENE

Over the course of the *GTA* series, Rockstar has gradually repurposed the missions to be less about gameplay or skill and more about playing out scripted story events and memorizing preset patterns. Storycentric events composed a small minority of *GTA3*'s missions, but in *San Andreas* you'll be hard-pressed to find a single job that doesn't feature a lengthy prologue and a healthy dose of running dialogue—frequently to the point where it interferes with the gameplay.

As a port, this PC version is a bit of a missed opportunity. The original PlayStation 2 game was great, but it suffered from shortcomings that really should have been addressed in the eight months since its debut. Unfortunately, PS2 veterans will encounter many familiar problems: unbalanced mission difficulty, vague objectives, the unreliable "trip skip" function, and lots of glitches.

CJ is no angel, though he's hardly unlikable.

You'll ride through the mean streets of San Andreas in style.

Gangsta gaming world!

WHAT'S NEW IN THE HOOD?

If you've got a PS2, you can pick up a copy of *San Andreas* for a mere $20. So why would you want to pay nearly twice as much for the PC version? Try these pluses on for size:

- **Improved graphics:** The most obvious upgrade—provided you have a decent graphics card. The models haven't changed, but the PC version offers more detailed textures and a better draw distance. No more flying into unseen mountainsides!
- **Do-it-yourself soundtrack:** Sure, you can listen to the excellent licensed soundtrack, but maybe you'd rather do your drive-bys to your own tunes. Just drop your Britney Spears MP3s into the proper directory to create your own custom radio station.
- **Better load times:** That's right, sucka—scene transitions are instantaneous. Now you can pack on the pounds at Cluckin' Bell faster than ever!
- **Mod potential:** Modders have worked wonders with previous *GTA*s—all with Rockstar's tacit approval. Already, *San Andreas* mods are floating around that supposedly unlock a sex minigame that the developers hid away to.

Rockstar, for its part, claims this is a load of bunk and that the minigame is all the doing of clever hackers...but then Rockstar would say that.

They're all here, same as ever.

Even if you have problems with the presentation, you can't fault the story itself, as it's stupendously written and acted. CJ is no angel, though he's hardly unlikable; it's difficult not to sympathize with his frustration as he's bullied around by forces far beyond his control. And while you may not approve of his more extreme methods, you have to admire his street-smart resourcefulness.

The supporting cast is top-notch as well, particularly Samuel L. Jackson's sleazebag cop and the yin-yang pair of Peter Fonda and James Woods as an ultraradical conspiracy theorist and an ultrareactionary government conspirator, respectively. But it's Young Maylay's turn as CJ—crude, angry, and more than a little crafty—that makes the story so compelling and helps you forgive occasional lapses into juvenile pandering. You'll shift uncomfortably in your seat as you gun down Army reservists and Navy pilots or kill a guy for the unthinkable crime of *being gay*, but for the most part Rockstar has made a sincere effort to rise above the usual childishness.

WELCOME TO MY HOOD

As professional as the voice acting is, the real star of the game is the state of San Andreas itself. It's majestically designed, and the low poly count is offset by an amazing depth. Minigames, collectible items, and shops lurk around every corner. You can gamble at casinos, go truckin', and even play weekend lothario by juggling half a dozen romances. You can explore the immense scenery by commandeering any one of the hundreds of cars, bikes, trucks, planes, helicopters, and boats, each with its own distinct physics. It's the sort of open, living world that gamemakers always promise but rarely deliver. Few videogame experiences are as satisfying or liberating as simply exploring this immense, complex world.

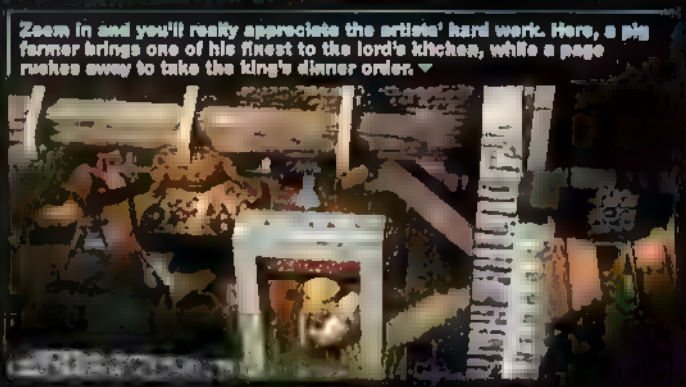
This latest *GTA* is an epic, involving experience, no doubt—but when you get past the expansive world and the RPG-like elements, it's the same epic, involving experience it was last year. Had Rockstar taken the time to polish up the rough spots, *San Andreas* on the PC would have been worth a look for everyone. As it is, it's only a must-have for the handful of gamers who missed it the first time around. / Jeremy Parish

Another brilliant entry in the *GTA* series, with only a few mild f#$%-ups...er, hiccups.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

VERDICT ★★★★½

Walls can be knocked down, captured with siege engines, or, for the discerning duke on a budget, scaled with good old-fashioned ladders.



Zoom in and you'll really appreciate the artists' hard work. Here, a pig farmer brings one of his finest to the lord's kitchen, while a page rushes away to take the king's dinner order.

STRONGHOLD 2

The walls come tumbling down

STRONGHOLD 2 WAS SEEMINGLY BUILT ON AN ambitious plan: Combine the economic model of the *Settlers* series, the combat model of the *Total War* series, and the fortress building of the *Castles* series—all while staying true to previous *Stronghold* games. Sadly, loose coding, numskull design choices, and "special-needs" A.I. turn what could have been a sleek, multitalented Bernard Hopkins into a muddled, out-of-control Mike Tyson.

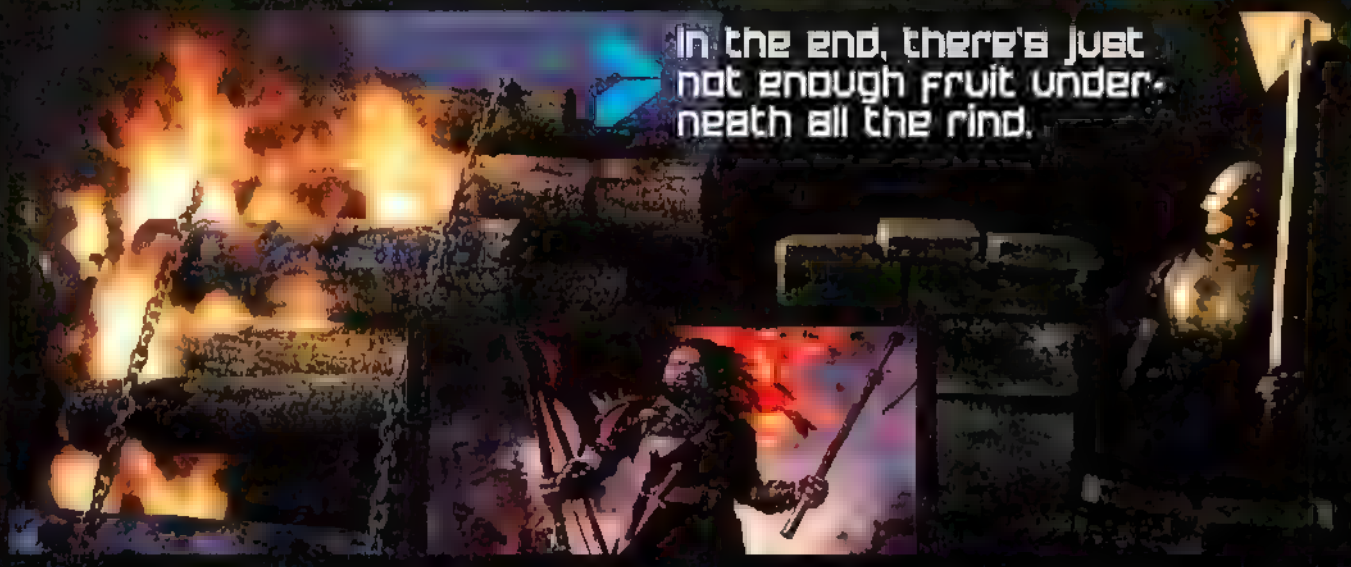
BRING OUT YOUR DEAD

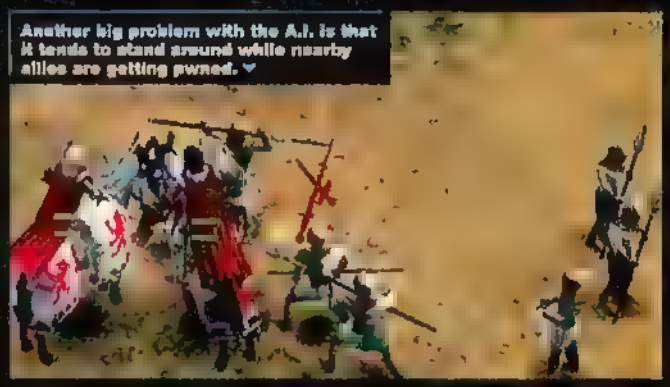
Stronghold 2 offers two separate single-player campaigns: a siege-oriented combat campaign and a hippie-fied wuss campaign in which you mostly gather resources. Neither is much fun, although for different reasons. The warfare campaign is weak primarily because of the A.I.'s total fixation with attacking whatever of yours is closest to it, regardless of tactical value. Obviously, this makes defeating a siege simple: Construct a bunch of throwaway structures (such as cheap wooden walls) just outside your main enclosure and have your archers leisurely install medieval air conditioning in the besiegers as they hack away mindlessly at the junk. Once you've got this "strategy" figured out, you won't exactly have to consult Merlin to create an effective stronghold.

Pathfinding is another A.I. foible. Unless you micromanage their every move, soldiers insist on taking the most geometrically direct route to a target, even if it means abandoning defilade for terrain that will slow them down and expose them to enemy arrows. There are also frequent traffic jams when troops move through a narrow area, such as a castle gate. And whenever a lot is going on, the framerate takes a harder dive than a Triple Lindy. All this is compounded by the lame combat controls, which basically consist of pointing at what you want to attack and hoping your soldiers make it through the ensuing mosh pit.

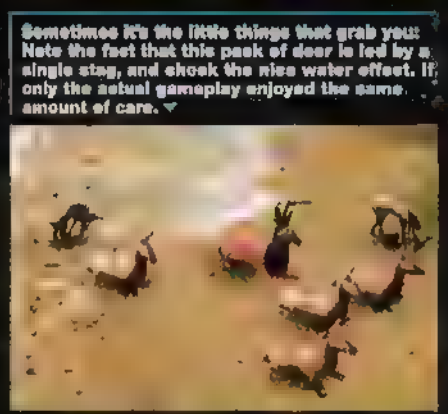
PENNY UNWISE

Less combat means the economic campaign doesn't have to deal with the A.I. deficiencies as much, but nevertheless, it has its own frustrations. First among them is the politburo-sanctioned economic system. For no easily comprehensible reason, raw materials in *Stronghold 2* cannot be brought directly from the buildings that gather them to the buildings that process them. They must first be deposit-




Another big problem with the A.I. is that it tends to stand around while nearby allies are getting pwned.

While the enemy A.I. doesn't always thrill with tactical acumen, the uniforms at least make for colorful battles. The pink knight always triumphs!


Sometimes it's the little things that grab you: Note the fact that this pack of deer is led by a single stag, and check the nice water effect. If only the actual gameplay enjoyed the same amount of care.

THE COMFY CHAIR

ed into a central stockpile, from which they are then picked up by the processor, taken to his shop, and used to create second-order goods. These, in turn, must be brought back to the stockpile and doled out to "end users." Everyone must share raw materials, and no one can be given preference—kind of a Dark Ages version of art class. While this might be attractive for an anarcho-syndicalist commune, here it only makes long-term urban planning virtually impossible (you can't know early on which structures should be located closest to the stockpile) as well as largely irrelevant (other than the stockpile, it doesn't matter what buildings are next to each other).

Stronghold 2 allows you to retain your towns and fortifications from mission to mission, rather than starting over with a blank slate. While this sounds sweet, it actually ends up being a major bummer, as your stockpiles will forever be closest to buildings that were important for the previous mission. And just to further oxidize your chain mail, there's no way to shut down an individual shop if it's sucking too many resources (which the shops closest to the stockpiles naturally will). Your only options are to raze the culprit building or shut down the entire industry in which it is involved. I can't believe this amazingly lame design decision ever got past QA.

KING FOR A DAY

But hey, it's not all bad news. While the A.I. may not be the smartest head on the pike, playing against other humans via multiplayer can be entertaining simply because they make much more effective use of the diverse structures, defense mechanisms, and units. And the graphics, when they're not lagging, are colorful and highly detailed, conveying a real sense of being there.

In the end, though, there's just not enough fruit underneath all the rind. If it's an all-in-one medieval strategy game you're after, just Alt-Tab really quickly between *Medieval: Total War* and *Castles II*—that'll come closer than *Stronghold 2* does. / Eric Neigher

Lots of potential; lots of disappointment.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

VERDICT ★★☆☆☆

Whaddya know? Chock it out—two racing games, and neither one sucks! Rad!

FLATOUT

A crash course in offensive driving

Take out your road rage in *FlatOut*, where auto collisions are key to your victory. ▲

SEVERAL MONTHS AGO, THE *FLATOUT* DEMO made a modest splash in the gaming community. This was because of the high jump, a hilarious mode in which you drive a car at full speed toward a steep incline and then eject the driver through the windshield to see how high he can fly before hitting the ground in a twisted slump.

The full version of *FlatOut* includes six of these so-called rag-doll sports, including bowling, darts, and a long jump. These events are simply extras in a surprisingly strong racing game which shine the spotlight on *FlatOut*'s great physics engine and interactive environments.

The tracks themselves are more like obstacle courses filled with sharp turns, construction zones, insane jumps, and debris of all sorts. Almost everything can be destroyed, knocked down, or shattered to bits. Colliding with objects isn't just an option—it's encouraged. In fact, destruction is a key factor to everything here. Smashing into things is the only way to generate nitro boosts, which are a vital part of your racing strategy—not only for gaining speed on straightaways, but also for speeding out of tight turns and correcting possible spins. It's a strange rule, but you won't question it when a huge pileup gives you enough nitro to make up for lost time.

WHAT'S YOUR DAMAGE?

Crashes occur often on the complex courses, which range from streets to icy tundra to muddy forests. Cars behave realistically in each environment, spinning out of control in the mud and skating treacherously across the ice. The damage effects are extensive and have a noticeable impact on your maneuverability. The competition will hit you early and often, and the A.I. is both aggressive and impressive. Winning races or performing well in the bonus games (which, in addition to the rag-doll sports, also include simple racing tracks and demolition derbies) earns you money, which you can use to upgrade your current vehicle or buy a new one.

FlatOut doesn't have nearly enough variety in its tracks. Though the layouts will change (sometimes only slightly), there are only a few landscapes, and they do get repetitive. This minor complaint aside, *FlatOut* is a great arcade-style racer. It's hard not to get excited when you sail between two cars as they smash together and roll hood-over-trunk through the air. And if you want to take a break from the racing, you can always head over to the high-jump track and throw your poor driver through a few windshields. / Ron Dulin

Grimy racing with excellent crashes and superb physics.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★★☆

You'll find many short, mayhem-filled courses to complete several times. ▲

TRACKMANIA SUNRISE

Stunt racing meets puzzle solving

TRACKMANIA SUNRISE IS ESSENTIALLY A racing game, but racing makes up only a fraction of the challenges. Even the traditional race mode takes place on crazy tracks that will hurtle you over towering loops and insane jumps as you race to beat the CPU's best records.

But the platform and puzzle modes are where the fun is really at. In platform mode, your goal is to finish in as few attempts as possible. Tracks in this mode feature a series of checkpoints separated by ludicrous jumps and twisty roads to speed through. If you fail, you'll restart at the last checkpoint, and success is measured by how many times you restart.

DESIGNER DRIVING

Puzzle mode challenges you to finish the race as quickly as possible, but you'll design the track yourself, using a limited number of pieces to connect the checkpoints. It sounds easier than it is; fine-tuning your course to better your score is both rewarding and mind-boggling.

Regardless of which mode you prefer, the tracks are the real stars here. Hairpin turns are followed by turbo boosts, which lead to massive ramps that send you soaring for several hundred yards through the air, only to land on another hairpin turn and another jump. Some tracks feature skateboard-style half-pipes, requiring you to drive at full speed up one wall, sail sidewise through the air, and then land nose-down on the next wall, only to continue—without stopping—into a loop or some other hair-raising stunt.

PHYSICS BE DAMNED

With the exception of inertia and gravity, the laws of nature are given only a casual nod. You'll never see any collisions or even so much as a dent, no matter how fast you ram into a barrier. Some outlandish perfection is expected of you as well; winning bronze and silver medals is relatively easy, but gold medals are awarded only for near-perfect races. You'll need gold medals to unlock levels, which requires dozens of repetitious attempts and a knowledge of every last twist and turn.

While it can be frustrating, *Sunrise* features plenty of variety. In addition to the single-player modes, there's an easy-to-use track editor and a multiplayer mode that allows you to race online, usually on custom-made tracks. Casual gamers may find a hefty learning curve, but the tracks are so inventive; it's ultimately worth the work required to unlock them. / Ron Dulin

Insane tracks, insane speed, insane difficulty.

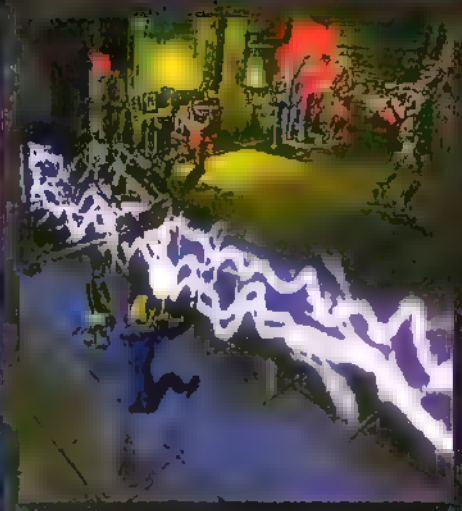
COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★★☆

PUBLISHER: Enlight Interactive DEVELOPER: Nadeo GENRE: Racing ESRB RATING: E REQUIRED: 800MHz CPU, 128MB RAM, 1GB install, 16MB videocard RECOMMENDED: 1GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 64MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: Internet, LAN (2-32 players)

DID YOU KNOW?

Before playing the Thing in *Fantastic 4* and tough guy Vic Mackey on *The Shield*, Michael Chiklis was the lovable "Commish."

Mr. Fantastic and the Thing would make a great team—that is, if they didn't spend all their time fighting over the camera.



Just because her name is Sue Storm, that doesn't mean electricity fields hurt any less.

We're resisting the urge to make a "flaming" joke here.

FANTASTIC 4

...Because *Mediocre* 4 didn't sound as good

THERE'S AN IMMEDIATE TEMPTATION TO write off this Hollywood by-product as a "*Fantastic 4* out of 10!" It's not that easy, though. The game is a competent button masher with a few mildly interesting twists...but saddled with a whole lot of issues.

Fantastic 4 does about what you'd expect, expanding the basic movie concept by creating set pieces for gameplay purposes through additional story lines penned by someone outside the development team and locked into ad nauseam gameplay—most likely due to a crunched development schedule. What you wind up with is a beat-em-up, with the game's hook hinging upon the player's ability to control Mr. Fantastic, the Invisible Woman, the Human Torch, and the Thing.

NOT SO FANTASTIC

The settings change, new villains are fought, and minigames are woven into each level, but this doesn't save *Fantastic 4* from being standard fare. The game doesn't bring anything new to the genre, and without an active interest in the source material, most people are likely to become bored with the basic three-button combos and lack of diverse special moves. You unlock all the cool stuff right from the start and simply jack up with upgrades through the rest of the game. There's an emphasis placed on the Fantastic 4 working as a team to defeat enemies, but that happens only during the occasional canned event or boss battle.

Fanboys, prepare yourselves for a terribly average adventure.

Even *Fantastic 4* fanboys are likely to roll their eyes at the plot. Hollywood writer Zak Penn of *X2: X-Men United* and *Elektra* fame may have added to the film's otherwise straightforward origin plot, but it's hard to tell the improvements since the dialogue and overarching narrative are both lifeless and, at times, totally random (which partially explains *Elektra*).

Glitches are an expected side effect of rushed development and they add a layer of frustration. *Fantastic 4* is no exception, and the small problems are numerous. Remember, too, this is a console port, so have a gamepad handy unless you're prepared to smash your keyboard in two. Halfway through most boss battles, the game presents the option of executing a "finishing move" that will remove the rest of the enemy's health in one cut-scened fell swoop. Deceptively, this maneuver is initiated by pressing a single button—except it doesn't work most of the time, either because other enemies run in front of the character, confusing the game, or there is a plain ol' bug.

Surprisingly, the game does include a fully functional co-op mode for two players to work through the game together. Co-op takes the single-player adventure and simply drops a secondary character into the mix. Sometimes this takes the form of another member of the Fantastic 4 or a miscellaneous character (i.e., a robot). The second player is often stuck waiting for the first player because their actions drive the level forward. For example, the Invisible Woman must sneak through a prison later in the game, locking away escaped inmates as she goes. In order to navigate the security doors, however, she must turn—surprise!—invisible, an impossible feat for the second player.

Also, fully 3D cameras are fine, but not when both players are simultaneously fighting to control the view. What's supposed to be a co-op experience devolves into you strangling your buddy with the gamepad wire.

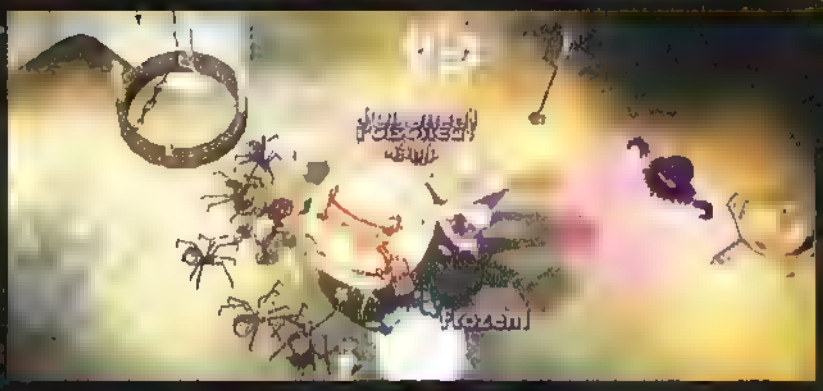
Comic aficionados may be eager to become a part of an interactive comic world, but fanboys, prepare yourselves for a terribly average adventure. The only reason to consider *Fantastic 4* is to cope with PC gaming's summer drought. /Patrick Klepek

Your standard-issue beat-em-up with a flashy license.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

VERDICT

★★☆☆☆



FATE

Choose your own adventure(r)

FATE IS A HACK-N-SLASH *DIABLO*-STYLE game just a few lush cut-scenes and a few dozen "Stay awhile...and listen!"s away from outright copyright infringement. This is not to say Fate is a bad game. It's not. It's chock-full of action, loaded with cool loot, packed with spells, swarming with packs of vicious monsters, and so on...just like *Diablo*.

So, for the purposes of this review, just close your eyes and think about *Diablo*. Got that mental picture? Good. Now here are the ways *Fate* differs.

CLASS DISTINCTIONS

The biggest difference in *Fate* is that there are no character classes, just a couple dozen stats that you tweak whenever you level. This lets you create a really personalized character, free from the rigidity of a barbarian, necromancer, etc. If you've always wanted to play as some weird scout/wizard hybrid, here's your chance. As you level, you gain fame, which lets you wield more powerful items as well as allocate more skill points. You can also pay a bard to sing your praises for higher fame, thus effectively giving you a way to pay your way to power.

In fact, gold is a huge part of this game. You're constantly shuttling from the endlessly generated random dungeons to the town to sell off items, buy crucial healing charms, and maybe buy a new weapon or piece of armor. Carrying around a balance in excess of 3 million gold pieces is not unusual in *Fate*, and needing 3 million gold for something isn't unusual, either.

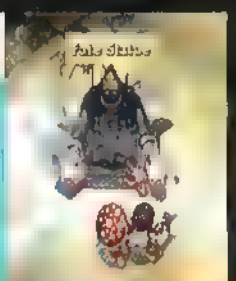
While *Fate* is solely a single-player game, you're not alone. Every character gets a pet, a scrappy dog or cat, that can be altered into a beast from the game by feeding it fish you catch in town or the dungeon. With every enemy having different weaknesses and strengths, you might want to keep a variety of fish to transform your sidekick into the best possible adversary for the situation. Or you could just have it transform into one critter permanently.

The game has a bright, cartoonish quality and is fully 3D. There are very few one-on-one battles—fights in *Fate* generally have you dealing with hordes of baddies, always in tight, subterranean dungeons (there are no outside levels). The game looks good enough, but the levels get dully repetitive about halfway through. Also tiresome: the inevitability of being poisoned. I have never been poisoned so much, so often, in a game. If you're not shouting, "Of course I am!" every time the narrator announces, "You've been poisoned," you're made of stemer stuff than me.

Fate isn't going to glue new brain cells inside your skull, but it isn't going to murder the ones you have. It's a good time, it really never reaches an end, and it may be the best way to while away the lifetime between now and *Diablo III*.

/ Robert Coffey

THE FICKLE FINGER OF FATE



Fate hits a number of crossroads, some more profound than others. Here's a list of the points where your adventure can potentially change course.

DEATH: This is the big one. You have three choices every time

GAMBLING:

FATE STATUES:

bosses. Do you feel lucky, punk?

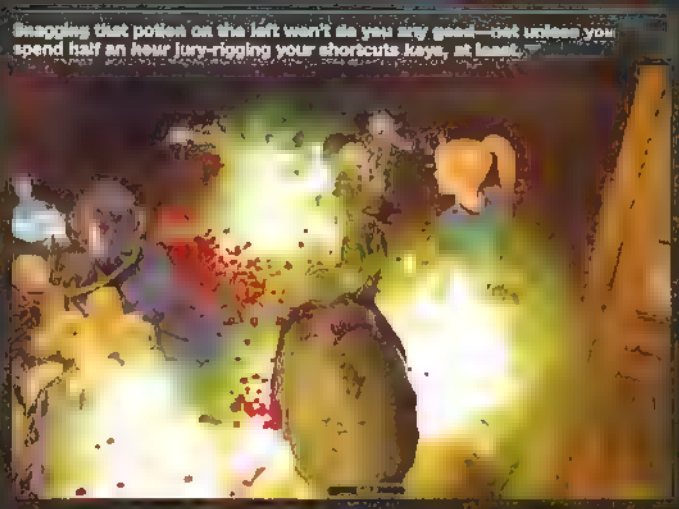
ENCHANTMENTS:

FORGES:

We remember back when this was called *Diablo*. But we like it anyway.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★★½

Getting burned alive when you bash treasure chests is a pleasure compared to many other parts of *Dungeon Lords*.



Snagging that potion on the left won't do you any good—not unless you spend half an hour jury-rigging your shortcuts keys, at least.

DUNGEON LORDS

A dungeon crawl to rock bottom

RECOMMENDED: 2.4GHz Pentium III, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard, broadband

DUNGEON LORDS HAS MORE BUGS THAN a cemetery and more missing features than a medieval skull. To put it more bluntly, it makes bad games look good. And as far as looks themselves go, it doesn't resemble an empty, drab, hackneyed RPG—it resembles an empty, drab, hackneyed RPG from five years ago. I couldn't even manage to make it to the end...and it's not just because many documented features, like the in-game map, are missing. It's because this horrible real-time action-RPG is broken beyond all bounds of playability.

The trouble starts right at character creation, where you are taunted with a plethora of nonfunctional character-appearance options. The game features four basic character classes: fighter, mage, thief, and adept. You can eventually pursue four additional classes as well...that is, if you can somehow evade the endless sea of bugs long enough to do so. Some of my favorites: Quest items mysteriously vanished from my inventory before I hit the first town, effectively preventing my progress; an NPC refused to assign me a primary story quest because I apparently clicked on a conversation topic too fast; exit portals failed to appear when I saved and reloaded during certain trials; key NPCs routinely got stuck in trees and behind doors while trying to follow me during quests; and entrances to new locations flung me backward instead of forward. Other problems, such as the auto-deletion of duplicate loot and nonfunctional shortcut keys and door keys, are just ludicrous.

You might want to take care who you invite to play—this game could be a friendship destroyer.

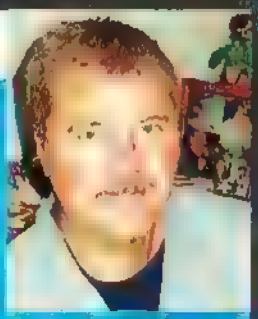
SHARING THE PAIN

Dungeon Lords can also be played cooperatively with up to seven unfortunate people in a multiplayer mode highly prone to lag and crashes. You might want to take care who you invite to play, though—this game could be a friendship destroyer. You'll find that the "friendly fire" damage option stays on regardless of whether you opt to disable it. And you can't target hostile mobs—you just swing wildly into the air, fruitlessly hoping to hit enemies instead of teammates. One handy way to avoid hitting your friends is to add spellcasting abilities to your fighter's repertoire; of course, it's also one way to avoid hitting mobs, because after casting spells (which are consumable and run dry pretty fast), your melee attacks inexplicably go dead. There's a workaround on DreamCatcher's forums, but this—and many other game-breaking bugs—will have you pulling your hair out in frustration.

DreamCatcher has lowered the bar with *Dungeon Lords*' epic display of unfinished game design and its obvious "wait for the patch" mentality. Given the pedigree behind this title (see sidebar), we were expecting a whole lot better. Silly us.

/Denice Cook

BRADLEY DOES BADLY



DUNGEON LORDS IS A DISASTER, but the game's developer, DW Bradley, is a seasoned designer who was the creative force behind some of the best early RPGs for the PC—*Wizardry V: Heart of the Maelstrom*, *Wizardry VI: Bane of the Cosmic Forge*, and *Wizardry VII: Crusaders of the Dark Savant* are all classic hardcore RPGs with deep combat and Byzantine plots. *Wizards and Warriors*, Bradley's 2000 return, isn't nearly as great, but it's nowhere near the mess that is

games on eBay instead.

ZERO STARS?!?

That's no typo—*Dungeon Lords* joins *Mistmare* and *Postal 2* to form an unholy trinity of the only games in CGW history to receive zero-star reviews.

***Dungeon Lords* puts gamers on the torture rack and then leaves them stranded there.**

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT

Whee! Explosions are fun! See that cool, shimmery explosion effect? Get used to it—it's everywhere.

There's something timeless about a shotgun blast to the face.

PARIAH

We repeat: Think twice before naming your game

PUBLISHER: Hip Interactive DEVELOPER: Digital Extremes GENRE: Shooter ESRB RATING: M REQUIRED: Pentium 4, 256MB RAM, 3GB installs, 64MB videocard, and a whole lot of patience RECOMMENDED: None PLAYER: LAN, Internet (2-32 players)

ONE OF *PARIAH*'S BIGGEST SELLING POINTS was supposed to be its solid, story-driven single-player game. Instead, at best, it's a poor man's *Half-Life* featuring a plot so convoluted, it makes you appreciate the finer points of storytelling in games such as *Psychotoxic*, which we awarded a whopping 1.5 stars last month.

The A.I. doesn't fare much better. Enemies (of which there are few variants) seem clueless. After we sniped one guard at a distance, other nearby troops completely ignored their fallen comrade. "Hey, you know what happened to Burt?" "Dunno. I was just talking to him a minute ago, and now he's sleeping...saaaaaay...what's that red stuff coming out of his head?" These are the guys we're supposed to be worried about? The promised "emergent A.I." has yet to emerge.

ON THE BRIGHT SIDE

While the weapons themselves are your standard assault rifle/shotgun/rocket launcher fare, the ability to mod your weaponry is a welcome change. Finding hidden weapon energy cores throughout the game will allow you to add a heat-seeking ability to sniper shots and a target-locking ability to rockets, for example.

And the graphics look nice, eking out that last bit of life from the Unreal Engine 2. In fact, Digital Extremes created a nifty shimmer effect that's thoroughly abused and overused in *Pariah*. Explosions shimmer, energy shields shimmer...if you want to wow us with effects, you've got to mix it up a little. And if the audio guys didn't exactly fall asleep on the job, they came close—the weapons could sound much more potent.

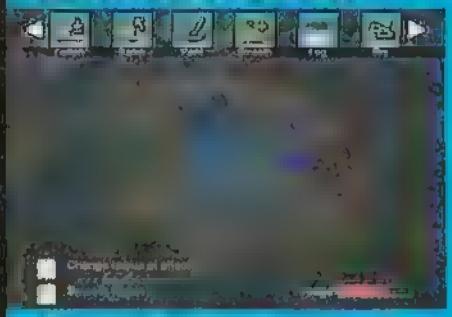
The primary bright spot in this otherwise unpolished title is multiplayer. Your standard-issue deathmatch, CTF, and assaultlike siege modes are represented, but the real strength here lies in the mapmaker. All it takes is one look online to see that the most frequently played maps are all user made.

Honestly, it looks like Digital Extremes spent its entire time perfecting the proprietary map editor (which works fantastically) instead of making the game fun. Six more months of dev time and a complete rewrite of the script could've made this a good game. Some free advice to *Pariah*'s publisher, Hip Interactive: Drop the price and repackage this as an awesome introduction to mapmaking with a couple of decent sample levels.

/ Darren Gladstone

MY FIRST MAPMAKER

THE ONLY REASON TO BUY PARIAH



Take a good look at the interface—it [illegible] raising or lowering the landmass by clicking on the appropriate icon.

You can do the same with vehicles, [illegible] and game objects. Set them up [illegible] you from creating a map.

Want to see how your map turned out? Jump straight into the action.

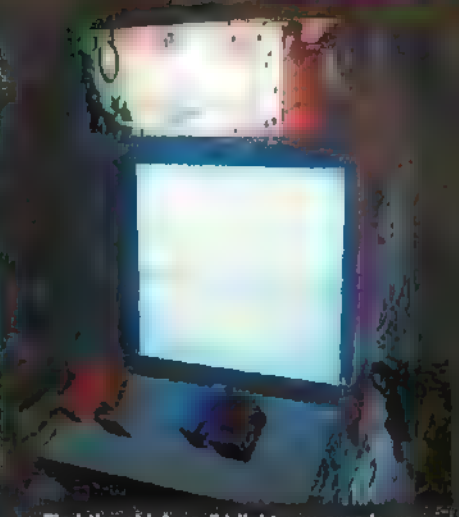
Lots of potential; lots of disappointment.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★½☆☆

DID YOU KNOW...?

The mad scientist running Area 51 in the movie *Independence Day* is Data from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

In all its two-fisted glory, you have the ability to wield two guns at once.



Find the old *Area 51* light-gun arcade game. The only thing missing: fat, sweaty nerds.

"Oh...wait...you're not Gordon Freeman. My mistake. Sorry to bother you."

AREA 51

Some things are best kept secret

WHILE THE INVOLVEMENT OF ONETIME *Doom* designer Tom Hall and Hollywood special-effects virtuoso Stan Winston infuses the arcadey *Area 51* with panache and production values previously lacking in the series, it doesn't save the shooter from being an ultimately derivative pastiche of elements found in superior games such as *Half-Life 2* and *Doom 3*.

> If you aren't asking, "Haven't I played this before?" it's only because you're staring in amazement at the rigid A.I.

IMITATION, MEET FLATTERY

A way-too-predictable walkthrough introduces *Area 51*'s control scheme, heads-up display, and other conventions ("This way, sir! You'll want to pick up some ammo!"). A way-too-predictable series of events starts its story: mutants and monsters and E.T.s invade; you and a squad of surviving troops try to evict 'em. What follows is a superlinear slog through a series of faintly familiar hallways in which an interminable number of bogeymen pop out at metronomic intervals. In fact, if you aren't asking yourself, "Haven't I played this game before?" it's only because you're staring in amazement as your rigid A.I. peers insist on sticking to their script, regardless of what's going on around them.

In the similarly linear *Call of Duty*, you actually worry about the welfare of your allies. Not so in *Area 51*. As you wander around the facility, trying to find the card key that opens the next area, your compadres maintain their positions in precisely the manner they were programmed to—little direction and less interaction is offered here. In addition, grunts unflinchingly take whatever damage you care to dish out. (OK, so some politely protest when you pistol-whip 'em—"Pardon me, but that's my head you're hitting.") Perhaps it's all in the interest of keeping things user friendly, but it kind of kills the tension, keeping *Area 51* true to its light-gun-game-in-the back-of-the-tavern roots.

Truly innovative ideas are few and far between. When good guy Ethan Cole's (spoiler alert!) alien infection spreads, the hero gains access to a few additional abilities that, to be honest, aren't different enough to make the game the gripping experience developer Midway Austin undoubtedly intended it to be.

Visually, this *Area 51* is slightly sharper than the Xbox version, but even with graphics settings cranked, the game still can't hold a candle to today's standard-setting competitors. Stellar sound effects compensate somewhat, matching the ferocity of the macho weapon selection. Still, the voice acting of David Duchovny and Marilyn Manson does little to enhance the vibe, with the always-wooden former *X-Files* star practically sleepwalking through his role.

SAVING GRACE

While the single-player game is the same old same old, multiplayer is a genuinely good time. Deathmatch maps don't offer the most compelling layouts but do a good job scaling level size in proportion to the number of participants, unlocking doors and expanding areas as more players log on. Multiple modes (DM, TDM, CTF, and Infected, in which one contaminated mutant tries to spread his cooties), the game's Earth vs. E.T.s selection of guns and grenades, and perfectly placed power-ups offer variety and make fragging fun. Perhaps the biggest problem is finding enough people online to put together a populated match.

Lacking ideas, *Area 51* plays up its license (and lessons learned from finer shooters) for a solid but unsurprising foray into the FPS field. Pity that it isn't more. / James Mielke

Forget the "me-too" single-player experience, just go online—if at all.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

VERDICT ★★★☆☆

IMPERIAL GLORY

Napoleon: Total War

PUBLISHER: Eidos DEVELOPER: Pyro Studios GENRE: RTS ESRB RATING: T REQUIRED: Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 2.5GB install, 64MB videocard RECOMMENDED: Pentium 4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: Internet (2-6 players)

IMPERIAL GLORY IS LIKE THE TYPICAL Hollywood period drama: It might look and sound authentic, but in actuality, it resembles history about as much as James Bond accurately portrays real spies. Pyro Studios tried hard to make *Imperial Glory* the *Total War* of the Napoleonic era but achieved little more than mediocrity.

All told, *Imperial Glory* is a tepid imitation of the *Total War* formula. In the campaign game, Europe and the Mediterranean are divided into a *Risk*-style map of provinces, each of which produces the game's four resources in varying proportions. Also scattered around the map are minor powers such as Saxony and Portugal, which mostly exist for the major powers to push around. The playable major powers—Britain, France, Prussia, Austria, and Russia—are, of course, trying to conquer everything in sight.

STRATEGERY!

The strategic game isn't badly done, but it's not particularly deep. You construct buildings, recruit armies, and march your troops off to conquer an empire. There's a decent alliance system you can use to create useful coalitions or annex minor powers peacefully, as well as a quest system that gives you various benefits once you accomplish certain goals. Unfortunately, these bright spots are marred by very limited resource production that forces you into many idle cycles of clicking the End Turn button.

When opposing armies meet on the battlefield, you enter the tactical mode to fight the battle. This area is *Imperial Glory*'s biggest black mark. While units often look like their historical counterparts, the gameplay is more akin to that of a traditional RTS; there's no measurement of morale, so units fight to the death—and even the victor suffers huge casualties. Artillery, which Napoleon considered the "queen of battle," is underranged and underpowered. Without canister shot for close actions, your artillery is easily overrun, ultimately making it more of a liability than an asset in battle. Shock combat is also unbalanced, as your cavalry units are inordinately powerful. Rather than featuring elegant interplays between the various arms and chess-like maneuvers of Napoleonic formations, the game has units with unbalanced abilities, which causes almost all battles to degenerate into giant fur balls of melee combat.

The one innovation here is the game's playable sea battles. They look great, but the interface is a hassle—you control each unit individually, so large battles are pretty much unplayable. Even the A.I. has problems here, as it tends to crash its own ships into each other when playing with a full fleet.

Imperial Glory is a great-looking game with a few good ideas, but it just gets too many things wrong. Despite the initial promise, the result is a pale imitation of *Total War* and a poor attempt at simulating history. / Di Luo

Looks good, doesn't crash—but it's neither historical nor very enjoyable.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★½☆☆

TIN SOLDIERS JULIUS CAESAR

Is that a centurion in your pocket?

PUBLISHER: Matrix Games DEVELOPER: Kalos Werke GENRE: War Game ESRB RATING: None REQUIRED: Pentium II 800MHz, 128MB RAM, 1GB install, 64MB videocard RECOMMENDED: Pentium II 900MHz, 256MB RAM, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: Internet (2 players)

FOR A TIME, THE ROMAN LEGIONS WERE THE unquestioned masters of the Mediterranean world. In this latest addition to the *Tin Soldiers* series, you lead these storied legions against both barbarians and fellow Romans in the many battles of Julius Caesar's career.

Tin Soldiers: Julius Caesar, like its predecessor *Tin Soldiers: Alexander the Great*, models itself after traditional tabletop miniatures war gaming. Its most unique feature is the simultaneous turn, in which both sides plot out their moves at the same time before executing them. Each turn is divided into three phases: main, reaction, and reserve. Orders are given to all units in the main phase, and depending on the result of those actions, you may get a chance to revise some of those orders later. This "we go" method adds unpredictability and suspense to an otherwise simple system. Even the best-laid plans will probably not survive contact with the enemy, especially if you're playing against another human. And like *Alexander*, this new *Tin Soldiers* looks great, with units colorfully depicted as lovingly hand-painted miniatures. After decades of hexes and chits, it's amazing how much life a little color and flair can bring to the staid war-game genre.

JC makes several improvements over *Alexander*. There are more unit types, including legions, which are more durable than traditional formations. The campaign is also less linear, allowing you to fight battles in different orders and giving you more control over the troops brought into each battle. Most importantly, the variety of battles has increased, including both defending and assaulting in a siege.

Unfortunately, *JC* kept many of *Alexander*'s faults. You still can't play as Caesar's enemies except in multiplayer. The A.I. remains pretty predictable, so most of the single-player challenge is due to the A.I.'s larger armies. Worst of all, there's no PBEM. With battles lasting for hours, multiplayer games are just too difficult to coordinate and play. / Di Luo

Good system and competent game crying out for PBEM.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★½☆

Tin Soldiers looks great, with units depicted as hand-painted miniatures

REWIND

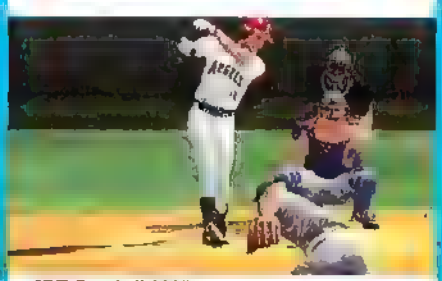
What should you play today? Names in Blue indicate Editor's Choice games.

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Act of War: Direct Action	06/05	★★★★½
Aerial Strike	06/05	★★½
Alexander	03/05	★★
Armies of Exigo	03/05	★★★½
Axis & Allies	01/05	★★½
Baseball Mogul 2005	Jul/Aug 05	★★★½
Blitzkrieg: Rolling Thunder	02/05	★★★½
Brothers In Arms: Road to Hill 30	06/05	★★★★½
Close Combat: First to Fight	Jul/Aug 05	★★½
The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay—Developer's Cut	03/05	★★★★★
Combat: Task Force 121	Jul/Aug 05	★½
Conflict: Vietnam	01/05	★★½
Cossacks II: Napoleonic Wars	Jul/Aug 05	★★½
Dangerous Waters	06/05	★★★½
D-Day	01/05	★★½
Decisive Battles of World War II: Battle in Normandy	01/05	★★★½
Domination	06/05	★★★½
Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil	Jul/Aug 05	★★★½
Dragoon	04/05	★★½
DRIV3R	Jul/Aug 05	★★½
Elite Warriors: Vietnam	Jul/Aug 05	★½
Empire Earth II	06/05	★★★½
Forgotten Realms: Demon Stone	04/05	★★½
Freedom Force vs The 3rd Reich	05/05	★★★★★
Gary Grigsby's World at War	06/05	★★★½
Guild Wars	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★½
Half Life 2	02/05	★★★★½
Hearts of Iron II	04/05	★★½
Heritage of Kings: The Settlers	06/05	★½
Immortal Cities: Children of the Nile	01/05	★★★½

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Joint Ops: Escalation	02/05	★★★★½
Knights of Honor	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★½
Legacy: Dark Shadows	04/05	★½
Lego Star Wars	Jul/Aug 05	★★★½
The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth	02/05	★★★★
Lost Admiral Returns	05/05	★★★½
Madden NFL 2005	Holiday 04	★★★★
Manchester United Soccer 2005	02/05	★★
The Matrix Online	Jul/Aug 05	★★★
Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault	01/05	★★★★½
Medieval Lords	04/05	★★½
Men of Valor	01/05	★★★½
MVP Baseball 2005	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★
NASCAR SimRacing	05/05	★★★★½
NBA Live 2005	03/05	★★★½
Need for Speed Underground 2	04/05	★★★★½
NHL 2005	01/05	★★½
NHL Eastside Hockey Manager	03/05	★★★★½
Obscure	Jul/Aug 05	★★½
Painkiller: Battle out of Hell	02/05	★★★½
Pitfall: The Lost Expedition	01/05	★½
Playboy: The Mansion	04/05	★½
Prince of Persia: Warrior Within	03/05	★★★★
Project: Snowblind	Jul/Aug 05	★★★½
Psychonauts	06/05	★★★★½
Psychotoxic	Jul/Aug 05	★½
Raging Tiger	04/05	★★
Return to Mysterious Island	04/05	★★★★
RollerCoaster Tycoon 3	02/05	★★★★
Rome: Total War	Holiday 04	★★★★½
The Saga of Ryzom	01/05	★★★½
Second Sight	Jul/Aug 05	★★★½
Secret of the Silver Earring	01/05	★★★★

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Sentinel: Descendants in Time	04/05	★★★
Sid Meier's Pirates!	02/05	★★★★½
Silent Hill 4: The Room	01/05	★★½
Silent Hunter III	05/05	★★★★★
The Sims 2: University	05/05	★★★★
Space Interceptor: Project Freedom	02/05	★★★
Splinter Cell Chaos Theory	06/05	★★★★★
The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie	02/05	★★½
Star Wars KOTOR II: The Sith Lords	04/05	★★★★½
Star Wars Republic Commando	05/05	★★★★
SuperPower 2	02/05	★½
Supremacy	Jul/Aug 05	★★
SWAT 4	06/05	★★★★★
Time of Defiance	04/05	★★★
Tin Soldiers: Alexander the Great	04/05	★★★½
Tribes: Vengeance	Holiday 04	★★★½
Ultima Online: Samurai Empire	02/05	★★
Vampire: The Masquerade—Bloodlines	02/05	★★★★
Vendetta Online	05/05	★½
World Championship Tennis	Jul/Aug 05	★
World Soccer Winning Eleven 8 International	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★
Zoo Tycoon 2	02/05	★★½

▲ Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil



▲ MVP Baseball 2005

▲ Lego Star Wars

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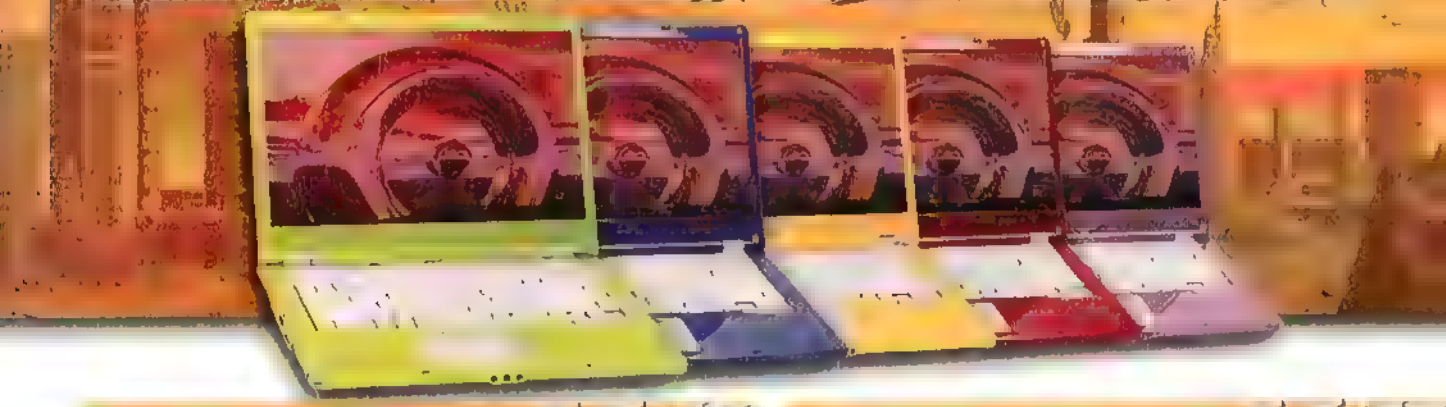

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10/100/1000 MBps Ethernet LAN
600Watt Surround Sound Speakers
Multimedia Keyboard & Optical Mouse
Microsoft® Windows® XP Home Edition
FREE 1-Year 24/7 *i-Care* Deluxe Technical Support + On-Site Service
Upgrade to Sirius RW300XL 2.1 Lighting Speakers Add $79

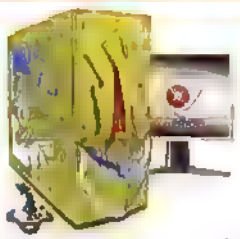
GAMER FX

AMD Athlon™ 64 3000+ Processor	$ 769
AMD Athlon™ 64 3200+ Processor	$ 819
AMD Athlon™ 64 3500+ Processor	$ 849
AMD Athlon™ 64 3700+ Processor	$ 899
AMD Athlon™ 64 X2 3800+ Processor	$ 979

NZXT® Trinity Mid-Tower Case + See Through Window + Neon Light
NVIDIA® nForce™4 Chip Motherboard w/ 16X PCI Express
Corsair 512MB DDR400 Memory
160GB 7200RPM Hard Drive
16x DVD ROM
52x32x52 CD-RW
NVIDIA® GeForce™ 6600 256MB 16X PCI Express Video Card
6-Channel Surround 3D Premium Sound
10/100 MBps Ethernet LAN
600Watt Surround Sound Speakers
Multimedia Keyboard & Optical Mouse
Microsoft® Windows® XP Home Edition
FREE Wireless 802.11g 54MBps Network Adapter
FREE 1 Year 24/7 *i-Care* Deluxe Technical Support + On-Site Service

BACK TO SCHOOL 64

Silver
Yellow
Green
Blue
Black



AMD Athlon™ 64 3000+ Processor	$ 809
AMD Athlon™ 64 3200+ Processor	$ 859
AMD Athlon™ 64 3500+ Processor	$ 889
AMD Athlon™ 64 3700+ Processor	$ 949
AMD Athlon™ 64 X2 3800+ Processor	$ 1029

NZXT® Guardian Mid-Tower Case + See Through Window + Neon Light
NVIDIA® nForce™4 Chip Motherboard w/ 16X PCI Express
Corsair 1024MB DDR400 Memory
160GB 7200RPM Hard Drive
16x Double Layer DVD±R/±RW + CD-R/RW Drive
ATI Radeon™ X700 256MB 16X PCI Express Video Card
6 Channel Surround 3D Premium Sound
10/100 MBps Ethernet LAN
Cambo RW-6510 5.1 Surround Speakers
Multimedia Keyboard & Optical Mouse
Microsoft® Windows® XP Home Edition
FREE Wireless 802.11g 54MBps Network Adapter
FREE 1-Year 24/7 *i-Care* Deluxe Technical Support + On-Site Service

NIGHT DREAMER FX

Silver
Yellow
Green
Blue
Black

AMD Athlon™ 64 3500+ Processor	$ 1359
AMD Athlon™ 64 3700+ Processor	$ 1409
AMD Athlon™ 64 4000+ Processor	$ 1519
AMD Athlon™ 64 X2 4200+ Processor	$ 1629
AMD Athlon™ 64 X2 4400+ Processor	$ 1689

Raidmax® Aluminum 8-Bay Super Light Weight Tower Case with 420 Watt Power + See Through Window + Sound Activated Neon Light
NVIDIA® nForce™4 SLI Chip Motherboard w/ 16X PCI Express
Corsair 1024MB DDR400 Memory
Serial-ATA 200GB 7200RPM Hard Drive w/ 8MB Cache
16x DVD-ROM Drive
16x Double Layer DVD±R/±RW + CD-R/RW Drive
2X NVIDIA® GeForce™ 6800GT 128MB DDR3 AGP 16X PCI Express Video Card
6-Channel Surround 3D Premium Sound
10/100/1000 MBps Ethernet LAN
Logitech X-530 5.1 Surround Sound Speakers
Multimedia Keyboard & Optical Mouse
Microsoft® Windows® XP Home Edition
FREE Wireless 802.11g 54MBps Network Adapter
FREE 1-Year 24/7 *i-Care* Deluxe Technical Support + On-Site Service

2ILLION FX

Silver
Yellow
Red
Blue
Black

AMD Athlon™ 64 3500+ Processor	$ 1439
AMD Athlon™ 64 3700+ Processor	$ 1489
AMD Athlon™ 64 4000+ Processor	$ 1599
AMD Athlon™ 64 X2 4200+ Processor	$ 1719
AMD Athlon™ 64 X2 4400+ Processor	$ 1768
AMD Athlon™ 64 FX-57 Processor	$ 2359

Raidmax® Samurai Gaming Case
NVIDIA® nForce™4 Chip Motherboard w/ 16X PCI Express
Corsair 1024MB DDR400 Memory
Serial-ATA 200GB 7200RPM Hard Drive
16x DVD-ROM Drive
16x Double Layer DVD±R/±RW Drive
NVIDIA® GeForce™ 7800GTX 256MB DDR3 16X PCI Express Video Card
6-Channel Surround 3D Premium Sound
10/100/1000 MBps Ethernet LAN
Creative Cambridge Desk Top Theater 5.1 5550 Surround Sound Speakers
Multimedia Keyboard & Optical Mouse
Microsoft® Windows® XP Home Edition
FREE Wireless 802.11g 54MBps Network Adapter
FREE 1-Year 24/7 *i-Care* Deluxe Technical Support + On-Site Service
Upgrade to Ultra X-Connect 500W ATX Power supply w/2 80mm Fans - Blue w/UV Orange -add $85

Editors' Choice

GOOD KNIGHT...

Vicious PC Paladin SLI

WHEN THE NEW LINE OF AMD PROCESSORS became the first benefactors of Nvidia's NForce4 SLI (Scalable Link Interface) technology for PCI Express, AMD stole the hearts and minds of gaming purists away from Intel in a big way. Exciting new technology tends to do that. Now Intel fights to get the purists back into its fold by adopting SLI. Enter Vicious PC, winner of last year's Ultimate Game Machine. Its newest Paladin SLI gaming monster is a seductively fast machine for serious and mainstream gamers alike, and its newest speed demon, which is based on the NForce4 MCP technology, shows Intel still has a gaming pulse.

For those still favoring an AMD-based system over an Intel one for gaming, listen up good. The Paladin SLI packs impressive game-performance speeds worthy of the AMD-based Paladin's past accolades. Kudos to Vicious PC and its computer-building prowess, because this new Paladin SLI—with its combination of Nvidia's NForce4 SLI MCP and Intel's Pentium 4 3.46GHz Extreme Edition 1,066MHz FSB processor, which resides on a feature-rich Asus P5ND2-SLI motherboard with two GeForce 6800 GT cards from XFX in SLI—simply takes gaming performance to new heights.

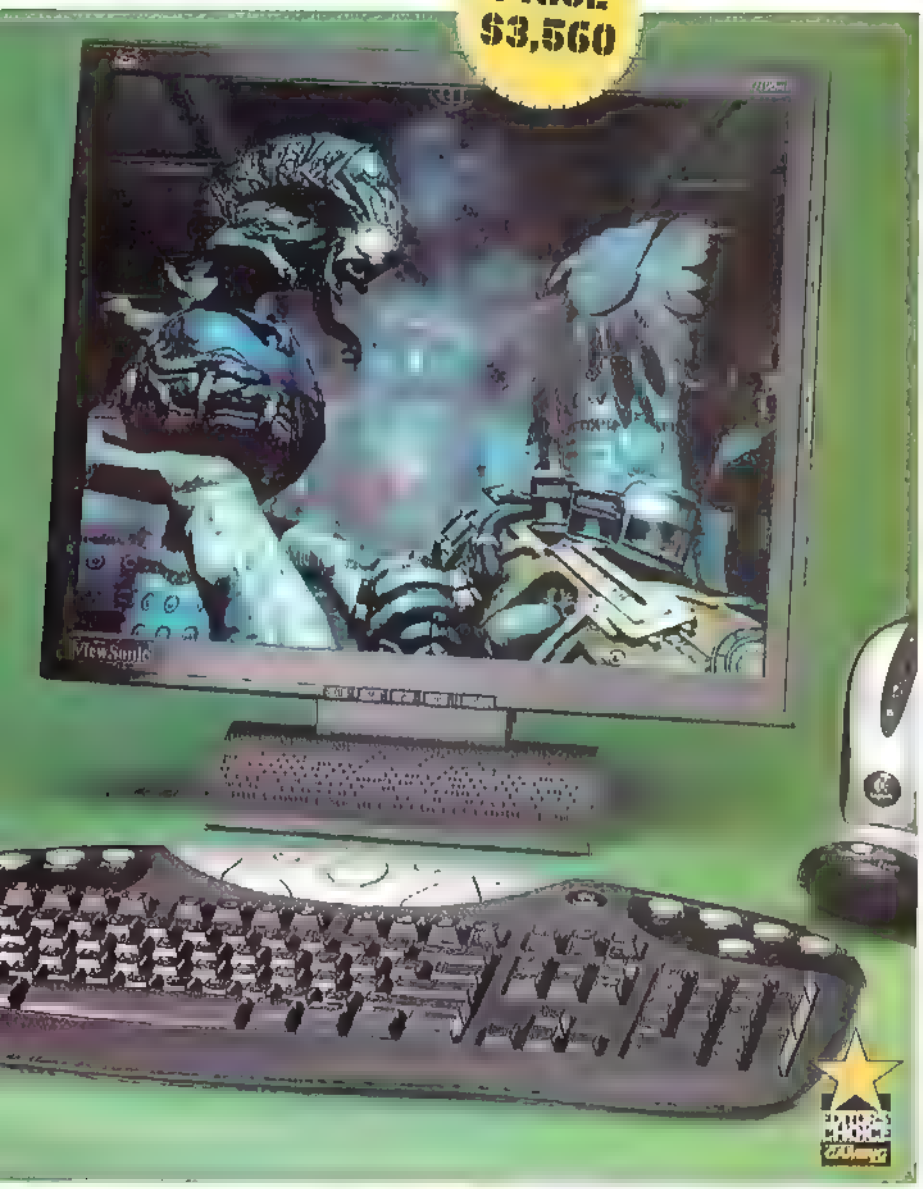
The Guts

COMPONENT	
Processor	Intel Pentium 4 Extreme Edition processor at 3.46GHz, 800MHz FSB, 2MB L3 cache
System Color	Jet black
Case	Full tower with aluminum door cover and SLI-ready 535W case with LCD temperature meters
CPU Cooler	AMD Athlon 64 3500+ 2.2GHz, socket 939 retail (with fan)
Motherboard	Nvidia NForce4 Intel SLI with 1,066MHz FSB, 16X PCI Express, and DDR2
Memory	1,024MB (1GB) PC2-5400 DDR2 667MHz memory (2 x 512MB)
Hard Drives	Dual 74GB SATA 150 10,000 rpm hard drives
RAID	RAID 0 striped drives—for performance purposes (SATA drives only)
Video	Dual Nvidia GeForce 6800 GT 256MB DDR3 with PCI Express, DVI, and TV out in SLI mode
CD/DVD/RW	Internal DVD+CD rewritable combo drive 16/52/32/52
Sound	Onboard 3D digital 7.1 8-channel sound
Networking	Onboard Gigabit (10/100/1000) PCI network card
Floppy	1.44MB 3.5 inch floppy disk drive
OS	Microsoft Windows XP Home Edition with CD and manual
Support	Standard three year limited parts and labor warranty

Testing the Paladin SLI with our 3D GameGauge Lite benchmark suite certainly proves this, scoring some unprecedented benchmarks across the charts. When all was said and done, the Paladin almost inched to the century mark with a final score of 91.23 (to put that number in perspective, its UGM-winning sibling scored 98.68 but cost about $2,000 more). *Halo*, *Doom 3*, *Far Cry*, and *Painkiller* all scored over 100fps in their respective benchmark tests, further proving this is an ultrafast gaming system. Perhaps more impressive, the Paladin SLI pumped out the best 3DMark05 score to date with a 7,956 at a 1280x1024x32 resolution with 2x antialiasing and 4x anisotropic filtering enabled. If it could have squeezed out just 50 more frames, this rig would have topped an unprecedented 8,000 level in 3DMark05. Not even the recent AMD SLI

Tech Commando
This month:
TC ponders the viability of going with SLI for those of us who don't have a million bucks hidden in our mattresses.

PRICE $3,560



systems we've benchmarked scored so high.

With supercool components, Vicious once again proves good looks can also remain functional, thanks to a stylish, toolless aluminum MGE Quantum chassis. It's one of those rare PC cases that not only looks good, but is functional in spades: Two large side-grill air-vent panels and a seven-fan controller panel easily keep air flowing briskly to cool internal components, and a sleek neon-blue advanced LCD controller sits on the front panel, updating you on fan speed, CPU temperature, and miscellaneous data like no one's business.

The bottom line is Vicious PC has an obvious talent for pushing the gaming-performance envelope—especially with Intel-based systems. Considering how long AMD has dominated Intel in the gaming arena of late, it's no mean feat. Matching good looks with (more important) high performance components, the Paladin SLI has won the heart of this tech guru and a place of honor among the plethora of AMD Athlon 64–based systems housed at the Cave. / Raphael Liberatore

Paladin SLI $3,560

Craving an Intel system for gaming? My friend, your search has finally come to an end.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

VERDICT ★★★★½

INSIDE

78

Nvidia GeForce 7800 GTX
Unparalleled speed—at least for this month.

82

NEW TECHNOLOGY

Creative Labs X-Fi
You're about to hear games in a whole new way.

Making Sense of 3D Game Gauge Lite v1.2

Each system goes through an exhaustive series of benchmark tests in order to assess overall performance and raw speed values. Benchmarking consists of both the industry's undisputed reference synthetic benchmark utility, 3DMark05, along with *CGW*'s own real-world game benchmarking suite, 3D Game Gauge Lite v1.2. 3DGG Lite consists of a brilliant collection of A-List action games like *Halo*, *Doom 3*, *Unreal Tournament 2004*, *Far Cry*, and *Painkiller*. 3DGG video configurations are set at the 1280x1024 resolution with 2x antialiasing and 4x anisotropic filtering enabled, except for *Halo*, which gets no benefit from either technique. Results are then tabulated and posted as a raw Geomean score for your reference.

3D GameGauge Lite 1.0

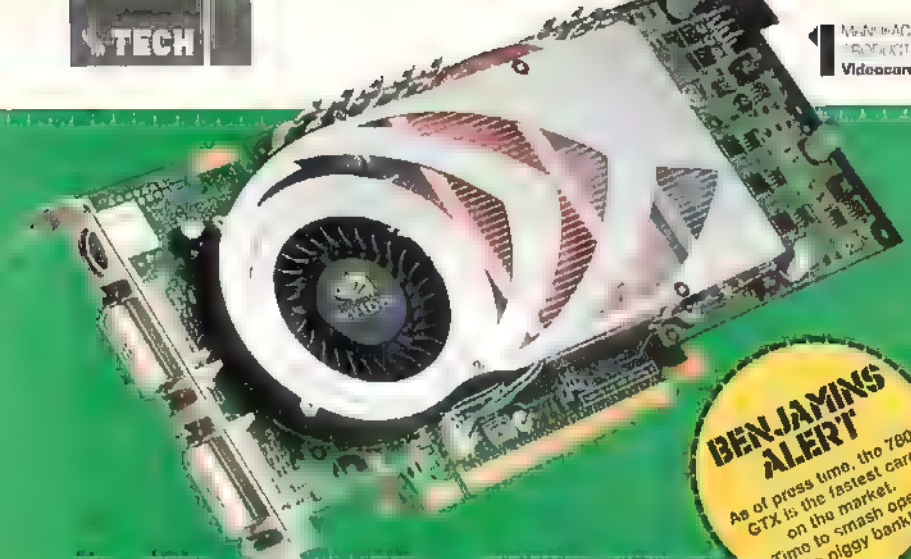
WORST — PALADIN SLI ▼ — BEST

40 — 98.65

HOW OUR GRAPH WORKS We graph a product's benchmark scores to demonstrate how it compares to the scores of other products we've reviewed in the last six months. During that time, the lowest 3D GameGauge 1.0 score we've seen is 40; the highest is 98.65.

1UP.com PRICE INDEX | **Prices for products not purchased directly from manufacturers were the lowest we found by shopping on 1UP.com.**

MANUFACTURER Nvidia
PRODUCT GeForce 7800 GTX
Videocard



BENJAMINS ALERT
As of press time, the 7800 GTX is the fastest card on the market. Time to smash open the piggy bank!

NUCLEAR POWER

[illegible] 7800 GTX [illegible]

EXTREMETECH

PC GEEKS ARE SPLIT INTO THE RED Camp (ATI) and the Green Camp (Nvidia), each staunchly defending their choices in graphics cards. For now, Nvidia's latest graphics juggernaut, the GeForce 7800 GTX, is king of the hill when it comes to raw power. But at a cost of around 600 bones, all the pixel shaders in the world can't save it from being an expensive add-on.

BY THE NUMBERS

Nvidia is quick to point out that the 7800 GTX architecture isn't a simple product refresh or tweak of the GeForce 6800 Ultra—the vertex and pixel shader pipelines have been completely redesigned. But since the core feature set is pretty much the same and the only differences are performance characteristics and power utilization, it's easiest to understand the new architecture in comparison to the previous one. The 7800 has only 10 percent more memory bandwidth and the same pixel fill rate, and runs at a mere 6MHz higher clock speed. The interesting parts are the 50 percent increase in pixel shader pipelines, from 16 to 24, and the 33 percent increase in vertex shader units.

With just 10 percent more memory bandwidth, how does this GPU hope to be significantly faster than the 6800's NV40 architecture? Nearly every part of the graphics pipeline has been tweaked, redesigned, or overhauled for greater efficiency. The 7800 GTX card draws about 100 watts, compared to 110 for the 6800 Ultra. Better still, the reference cooling solution is single slot and runs much more quietly—no leaf blowers here, which is great news for those building high-performance systems into smaller cases.

FUN WITH BUZZWORDS

One of the 7800 GTX's big bullet points is what Nvidia calls Transparency Adaptive Anti-Aliasing (or TAAA). TAAA is aimed at improving the image quality of textures with alpha (transparency) data. Current anti-aliasing methods smooth out most onscreen jaggies, but they can't handle objects like chain-link fences that have "clear" spots where you're supposed to see between the links. Nvidia's new solution provides anti-aliasing to the links of those chain-link fences (or any other object with transparency in the texture).

However, we should point out that the 7800 GTX doesn't really do anything new to improve standard anti-aliasing modes. The cards are still limited to 4x multisample AA, plus the 6x6 mode, which combines 4x multisampling AA with 2x supersampling. The multisample pattern hasn't changed at all—it's still the tried-and-true rotated grid pattern used in the last generation of GeForce cards. Nvidia promises a boost to 16x AA, which will be a combination of 4x supersampling and 4x multisampling, but it's not in the initial driver release. The company promises a driver update soon that will enable this new mode, possibly only on SLI systems.

Basically, the main goal of the 7800 GTX is greatly improved performance. This new architecture is all about making existing and upcoming games run much faster, especially those that use floating point textures and HDR rendering, like those using Unreal Engine 3.

THE TEST RUN

So how did the 7800 GTX stand up against the current crop of games? Maybe it was because we had a fully loaded Athlon 64 FX-55 (2x512MB [illegible]

motherboard), but the 7800—as expected—cut a bloody path through our tests. The 7800 GTX has 50 percent more pixel shader pipelines and a third more vertex shader pipes, so it's unsurprising that its scores in 3DMark05 scores are roughly 50 percent higher than the 6800's. And this is with 1600x1200 resolution, as well as 4xAA and 8xAF turned on. It goes without saying: The new GPU also outstrips ATI's best by quite a margin.

As for real game tests: It's hard to believe, but it's *Far Cry*—not *Doom 3* or *Half-Life 2*—that shows we still have plenty of need for more powerful graphics cards. A single 7800 GTX is about 25 percent faster than the 6800 Ultra, and 15 to 20 percent faster than the X850 XT PE. Is that enough to make the game CPU bound? Hardly. Two 7800 GTX cards in SLI show there's still plenty of headroom left, so long as you run at a render state higher than 1280x1024 without AA or AF.

Bottom line: Nvidia has unquestionably produced the fastest videocard to date—at least until we see what the big deal is with ATI's upcoming next-generation architecture, code-named R520. Unfortunately, this unprecedented speed comes with an unprecedented price tag: GeForce 7800 GTX cards are expected to cost $599. With GeForce 6800 Ultra cards selling for under $500 now, we can't really say the 7800 GTX represents much of an improvement in value. Basically, only three types of people will own these cards: the rich, the hardest of hardcore gamers, and tech editors. But if you've got the green and you want to run at high resolutions with anti-aliasing and anisotropic filtering all the time, it's worth a look. —Jason Cross

Making Sense of 3DMark05

3DMark05 is the quintessential synthetic benchmark for testing gaming hardware. It's primarily a graphics-focused test suite that utilizes DirectX 9.0c with Pixel Shaders 2 game tests, and features, batch, and CPU tests. The final score reflects a combination of graphics and CPU loads at 1280x1024 resolution with 2x antialiasing and 4x anisotropic-filtering enabled.

HOW OUR GRAPH WORKS We graph a product's benchmark scores to demonstrate how it compares to the scores of other products we've reviewed in the last six months. During that time, the lowest 3DMark05 Pro score we've seen is 1,904; the highest was 7,275, until now.

It's king of the hill when it comes to raw power.

GeForce 7800 GTX $600

Nvidia focuses on speed and delivers it in spades, but at a price that means many gamers won't be able to enjoy it.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★★☆

Hitachi Deskstar 7K500 500GB 7,200 rpm SATA II HDD

mance, and more than enough space to keep you from thinning your herd of games and MP3 music. Not only is the Deskstar 7K500 a solid performer with a 16MB data buffer and a solid media transfer rate of 817 Mbps, its native command queuing (NCQ) SATA II interface at 300 MBps makes it one of the fastest drives at this enormous capacity on the planet. You'll appreciate this when you see the decreased load times for data hogs such as *Half-Life 2* or *Rome: Total War*.

The Deskstar 7K500 comes in either SATA II or PATA interfaces. Forward-looking gamers will want the added benefit of a SATA II interface, especially in a high-performance RAID setup that matches two 500GB drives for a gigantic 1,000GB array of raw speed. I saw *Doom 3* benchmark scores jump 10 frames just by upgrading from a single 7K250 HDD to this sort of setup.

The Deskstar also runs at a very quiet 3.1 dB. And if this isn't enough, the Deskstar's "Smooth Stream" technology optimizes buffer management for improved music or movie-clip playback. If you're a hardcore gamer with big bucks, then grab one (or ideally two) of these puppies for the best native SATA II HDD money can buy. **/Raphael Liberatore**

GRAB A GREAT BIG PLATTER AND ENJOY

Deskstar 7K500 500GB 7,200 rpm SATA II HDD

WITH GAMES GETTING INCREASINGLY larger and gobbling up precious hard-drive space like a fat uncle obliterating the limited supply of Thanksgiving stuffing, you'll find yourself weighing which of your older games to dump for the newest arrival. Or you could just add another HDD.

Hitachi's new megahuge Deskstar 7K500 500GB 7,200 rpm Serial ATA II hard drive may be the answer to your storage dilemma, offering speed, performance, and more than enough space to keep you from thinning your herd of games and MP3 music. Not only is the Deskstar 7K500 a solid performer with a 16MB data buffer and a solid media transfer rate of 817 Mbps, its native command queuing (NCQ) SATA II interface at 300 MBps makes it one of the fastest drives at this enormous capacity on the planet. You'll appreciate this when you see the decreased load times for data hogs such as *Half-Life 2* or *Rome: Total War*.

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Deskstar 7K500 — $199

Pretty much the ultimate in SATA II hard drives

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★★½

Tech Commando

Commo from the hardware front lines

THE IDEA OF LINKING TWO GRAPHICS cards and running your favorite games at insanely fast framerates sounds great, but I'm not completely sold on SLI yet. For all of its benefits, SLI still possesses a couple of shortcomings—namely, its immature technology and extreme cost.

I can certainly attest to SLI's speed, but I've experienced enough crashes, freezes, blue screens, and general system anomalies to recognize that this technology is still maturing. And while Nvidia certainly gets credit for gobbling up 3dfx and then retooling that technology to fit its own, it needs to understand that many gamers simply can't afford SLI. The total cost of an SLI NForce board ($200 to $280) plus two GeForce 7800 GTX cards ($1,200+) in a high-end setup can be $1,500 or more.

On the bright side, Nvidia recently introduced www.slizone.com, a fantastic portal containing everything related to SLI, including info, tidbits, game lists, drivers, products, and contests for gaming enthusiasts and developers alike.

Still, I've hit a crossroads with SLI—I love it, but simply can't recommend it without considering a gamer's finances. For those with deep pockets, SLI is a no-brainer. Everyone else should just wait, allow the technology to mature some more, and hope the price drops in the interim.

Raphael Liberatore

SUV SPACE IN A SPORTS CAR BODY

LaCie Mobile Hard Drive, Design by F.A. Porsche

IF YOU'RE A NONTECHIE TYPE WHO'S afraid of opening your case to add another drive, what can you do? Simply add a LaCie FireWire drive. It's a quick, simple, external solution for adding storage without installation trauma.

Designed by an F.A. Porsche design team (yeah, the same guys behind those cars you can't afford), this sleek-looking lightweight beauty comes with a superfast FireWire transfer rate and a variety of capacities (from 80 to 250 GB). This HDD will not only provide the storage you desire, but in most cases, will enhance the look of your setup since it will stand out like a Porsche parked next to your clunky Yugo of a desktop tower.

FireWire is a popular storage solution thanks to zippy transfer rates topping 400 mbps. Using the IEEE 1394 standard, FireWire is especially useful for streaming video and/or high-end game applications where isochronous data requires a delivery of sustained throughput at high speeds. Like the USB standard, FireWire is both hot swappable and plug-and-play, and can be daisy-chained using other self powering 1394 peripheral devices.

The LaCie FireWire drive also can act as a system backup drive, and the Silverling and SilverKeeper utilities software makes use of several system formats, including FAT32, NTFS, UNIX, and Mac OS Extended or Standard (HFS). LaCie also makes a USB 2.0 version of this drive for computers lacking the 1394 standard. It all adds up to a solid option for gamers needing extra storage or portability. **/Raphael Liberatore**

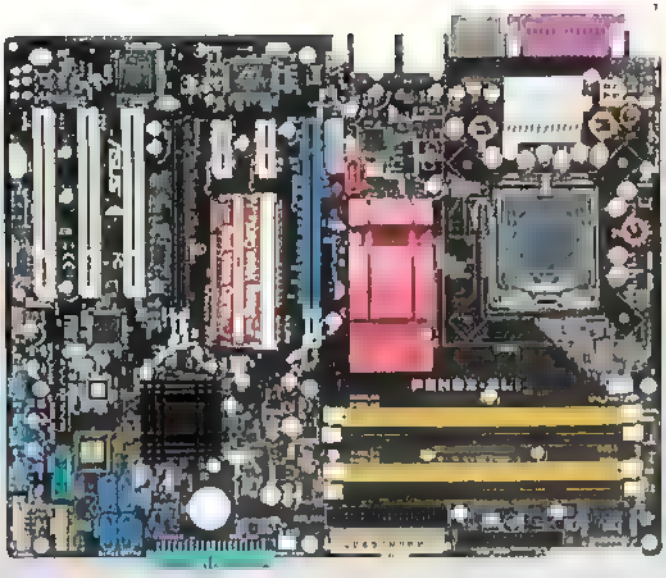
MANUFACTURER **LaCie**
PRODUCT **LaCie Mobile Hard Drive, Design by F.A. Porsche**

LaCie Hard Drive — $179

Simple, effective, and not bad looking.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★½

AMD OR INTEL?
AMD's proc is faster, but Intel's merchandising deals keep it on top in terms of overall sales.



MANUFACTURER: Asus
PRODUCT: P5ND2-SLI Deluxe Motherboard

P5ND2-SLI Deluxe $259

Intel's SLI setup loses by a step, but I'm more impressed it threw gamers a bone.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★★½

SLI SHOOT-OUT

Double your processing pleasure

ONCE UPON A TIME, GAMERS LOOKING to dramatically boost their gaming framerates with SLI technology had but one option: an AMD chipset. But with Intel recently jumping onboard the SLI bandwagon, those same gamers are now faced with a choice: AMD or Intel. Most gamers don't have the luxury of building two systems and comparing the results—but I do.

I started with a pair of top-notch Asus PCI Express motherboards armed with Nvidia's powerful NForce4 chipset. The difference? Two reference-quality 64-bit-capable CPUs: In one corner, the Asus A8N-SLI Deluxe motherboard matched with the reigning king of gaming processors, AMD's flagship Athlon 64 FX-55 Socket 939 processor supporting HyperTransport technology; in the other, Asus' new P5ND2-SLI Deluxe mobo with Intel's top Pentium 4 Extreme Edition 3.73GHz Socket 775 processor supporting Hyper-Threading and Enhanced Intel SpeedStep technologies.

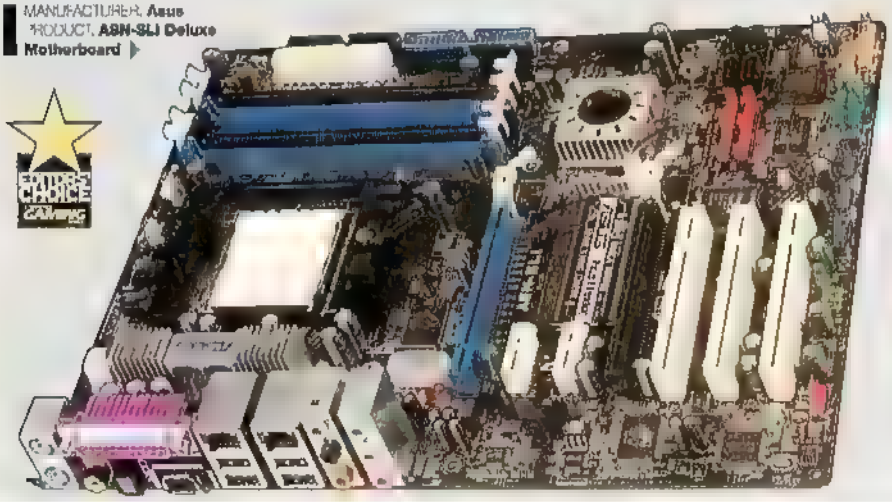
For fairness, each system was built with identical components: two BFGTech GeForce 6800 Ultra OCs, two Hitachi 7K500 500GB SATA II HDDs in RAID 0, Windows XP Professional, PC Power & Cooling's 580-watt power supply, and the same dual-layer DVD-RW drives. The major difference came in memory management. Since the AMD-based motherboard still supports DDR while the Intel-based mobo moves into DDR2, we used 1GB of Corsair TwinX 400MHz DDR RAM modules on the AMD board, as opposed to the faster 1GB of Corsair 5400U DDR2 RAM on the Intel motherboard.

For benchmark testing, we used both the 3DMark05 synthetic benchmark as well as our very own suite of 3D GameGauge Lite 1.0 benchmark games, running at 1280x1024 with 2x antialiasing and 4x anisotropic filtering enabled (except for *Halo*). Both systems scored pretty impressive marks across the board, with a slight edge going to AMD for scoring almost 13 points higher in our 3DGG suite. Both setups covered the same 3DMark05 scores, and in games like *Far Cry*, both hit framerates in the mid 90s. The notable difference came when running processor-heavy benchmarks in *UT2004*, which ran at a blisteringly fast 124fps on the AMD setup while it positively chugged on the Intel setup at 48fps.

So what does all this mean? Well, the final tally proved to be closer than expected, that *UT* score notwithstanding. Simply, the high scores from both systems blew the top off our charts with their out-of-this-world performance. The AMD FX-55 and Asus A8N-SLI combo, however, moved slightly ahead of the Intel setup on the 3DGG performance scorecard, and way ahead in terms of cost-effective pricing, thereby retaining its title as the best SLI-ready processor choice for gaming.

Both reference-quality boards highlight Asus' prowess at providing each processor camp a great platform upon which to flex its graphic muscle. AMD or Intel both—on those motherboards—simply rock...it's just that AMD rocks a little bit harder, a little bit longer. The biggest winner here is you, the gamer, reaping the blindingly fast rewards provided by the continued growth of SLI. / Raphael Liberatore

MANUFACTURER: Asus
PRODUCT: A8N-SLI Deluxe Motherboard



EDITOR'S CHOICE Gaming

A8N-SLI Deluxe $165

AMD still offers the best SLI solution. No one remembers second place, right?

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★★★

The biggest winner here is you, the gamer.

THE CONTORTIONIST

Flatron L1980Q LCD Monitor

LG MUST HAVE SOMEONE ON STAFF who previously worked for the Ringling Brothers, as the company's new Flatron L1980Q 19-inch ultraslim LCD monitor has the flexibility of a sideshow contortionist. This monitor bends backward, swivels sideways, tilts forward, and rotates up to 270 degrees easily, all while keeping the image right where it's supposed to be—directly in front of you. How extremely can it be bent? While most LCDs tilt 10 or 20 degrees from their stationary base, the L1980Q tilts back a full 150 degrees, allowing it to serve as a very expensive TV dinner tray.

Beyond the pretzel factor, the L1980Q is an elegant LCD that really performs, with a handful of cool gaming features particularly worth noting, like its outstanding 8ms response time for blowing through fast-moving games like *America's Army* with almost zero ghosting or streaking. The L1980Q also features an above-average pixel pitch, a contrast ratio of 500:1 for showing off blacks and grays, and a brightness level of 250 nits, which is perfect for spotting enemies lurking in the shadows. The resolution maxes out at 1,280x1,024 pixels at 75Hz for beautiful imaging, and the monitor supports both analog VGA and DVI-D interfaces, making it a good choice for old and new videocards alike. The proprietary f-Engine image-processing technology enhances brightness and color simultaneously, making even the gloomiest DVDs spring to life.

The price tag will keep many gamers from bending over backward to get this baby, but if you've got the scratch and need a monitor that can literally do the twist, this is the display for you. /Raphael Liberatore

Flatron L1980Q $589

If only Gumby were this flexible and pleasing to the eye.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★★½

A-LIST

Welcome to Olympus, Mount Computer Components and Devices for Gaming Gamers. Plenty of territory—from high-performance to budget—but only the best of the best make it here.

CPUS

Best Performance Processor
AMD Athlon 64 FX-55 CPU
(AMD – www.amd.com – $850)

Best Budget Processor
AMD Athlon 64 3500+ 2.2GHz "Winchester" CPU (AMD www.amd.com – $250)

MOTHERBOARDS

Best Performance Motherboard
Asus A8N-SLI Deluxe NForce4 Motherboard
(Asus – www.asus.com – $165)

Best Budget Motherboard
Chaintech VNF4 Ultra Zenith VE NForce4 Ultra Motherboard
(Chaintech – www.chaintechusa.com – $95)

GRAPHICS CARDS

Best Performance Graphics Card for AGP
ATI Radeon X850 XT Platinum Edition AGP 256MB GDDR3 Graphics Card
(ATI Technologies – www.ati.com – $599)

Best Performance Graphics Card for PCI Express
BFGTech Nvidia GeForce 6800 Ultra OC PCI Express 256MB GDDR3 Graphics Card
(BFGTech – www.bfgtech.com – $549)

Best Budget Graphics Card
BFGTech GeForce 6600 GT OC 128MB GDDR3 Graphics Card
(BFGTech – www.bfgtech.com – $239)

RAM

Best Performance DDR RAM
Corsair XMS TWINX1024-4400 1GB Kit 550MHz 1024MB DDR RAM Kit
(Corsair – www.corsairmicro.com – $360)

Best Performance DDR2 RAM
Corsair XMS2 Twin2X1024A-5400UL 675MHz 1024MB DDR2 RAM Kit
(Corsair – www.corsairmicro.com – $340)

Best Budget DDR RAM
Kingston HyperX KHX3500A/512 433MHz 512MB DDR433 PC3500 Kit
(Kingston – www.kingston.com – $100)

MONITORS

Best LCD
Dell 2405FPW 24-inch LCD Monitor
(Dell – www.dell.com – $1,299)

Best Budget LCD
NEC-Mitsubishi MultiSync 1970GX 19-inch LCD Monitor
(NEC-Mitsubishi – www.nec.com – $499)

Best CRT
NEC MultiSync FE2111SB BK 22-inch CRT Monitor
(NEC – www.nec.com – $499)

SOUND

Best Soundcard
Creative Sound Blaster Audigy 2 ZS Platinum Pro Soundcard
(Creative Labs – www.creative.com – $180)

Best Budget Soundcard
Mad Dog Entertainer 7.1 DSP Soundcard
(Mad Dog – www.mdmm.com – $39)

Best Speaker System
Logitech Z-5500 Digital 5.1 Speakers
(Logitech – www.logitech.com – $399)

Best Budget Speaker System
GigaWorks ProGamer G500 5.1 Speaker System
(Creative Labs – www.creative.com – $249)

Best Headphones
Zalman ZM-RS6F Headphones
(Zalman – www.zalmanusa.com – $60)

GAME DEVICES/PERIPHERALS

Best Gaming Mouse (tie)
Razer Diamondback Optical Mouse
(Razer – www.razerzone.com – $59)

Logitech MX 518 Gaming-Grade Optical Mouse
(Logitech – www.logitech.com – $49)

Best Mouse Pad
Steelpad 4D Mouse Pad
(Soft Trading – www.steelpad.com – $29)

Best Gaming Keyboard
Gamers Keyboard
(Sortek – www.saitek.com – $59)

Best Wireless Keyboard-Mouse Combo
Logitech Cordless Desktop MX3100
(Logitech – www.logitech.com – $109)

Best Joystick
CH Products Fighterstick USB
(CH Products – www.chproducts.com – $149)

Best Gamepad
Logitech Cordless Rumblepad 2 Wireless
(Logitech – www.logitech.com – $39)

Best Racing Wheel
Logitech MOMO Racing Wheel
(Logitech – www.logitech.com – $90)

NETWORKING

Best Gaming Router
DGL-4300 GamerLounge Wireless 108G Gaming Router
(D-Link – www.d-link.com – $160)

Best Switch
SMC8508T EZ Switch 10/100/1000 Gigabit 8-port Unmanaged Switch (SMC – www.smc.com – $159)

Best Network Adapter
Belkin Pre-N Notebook Network Card
(Belkin – www.belkin.com – $110)

GAMING NOTEBOOKS

Best Performance Notebook
Alienware Area-51m 7700 Notebook
(Alienware – www.alienware.com – $3,200)

Best Budget Notebook
Dell Inspiron XPS Gen 2 Notebook
(Dell – www.dell.com – $2,850)

HEAR IT! CHECK OUT THE DEMO ON THIS MONTH'S DVD

MUSIC TO

Creative Labs' X-Fi technology will change the way yo

Remember when 3D cards were just coming out and you'd read about them and become mildly interested—right up until you saw GLQuake in action and that mild interest immediately morphed into burning desire? A few months back, we were that excited about the prospect of a separate CPU handling superrealistic physics. Now we have a new obsession. We recently heard Creative Labs' new X-Fi (Extreme Fidelity) technology in action. And trust us, once you hear it too, you'll never want to listen to standard PC audio—be it music or gaming—ever again.

IT'S ALL IN YOUR HEAD

Creative's vision for this leap forward in sound quality is aimed directly at your head...via your headphones. Why headphones? Because Creative's research revealed that a sizable majority of PC users and gamers listen to content almost exclusively through headphones. That would seem counterintuitive, considering the number of 2.1, 3.1, 5.1, and 7.1 speaker systems on the market, but think about it: Teens don't want anyone to hear what they're doing, LAN gamers need headphones to pick up their own aural cues and to cancel out the noise of their surroundings/competitors, and unless you live alone, the odds are your housemates/spouses/wardens don't want to be bothered by you blasting *Doom 3* demons in glorious 7.1 surround sound cranked up to 11 at 2 a.m.

Creative isn't the only manufacturer working on headphone surround (see "The Competition" sidebar), but as the company that arguably started and has dominated the soundcard market for some 16 years, it's the one to beat. Powered by a 3.4GHz CPU capable of 10K MIPS that lets it perform the demanding floating point calculations you pay for in high-end receivers, the X-Fi card is actually three cards in one: a gaming-audio solution, a digital-entertainment product, and a prosumer-caliber audio-creation tool. The X-Fi—which is 24 times as powerful as Creative's current top-of-the-line Audigy card—is able to do all these things so well because it dynamically throws all its processing muscle behind whichever application you want running at the time—simply pop open the appropriate console and you're good to go.

THE OUTSIDE WORLD

Perhaps the most striking thing about X-Fi is the Creative Multi-Speaker Surround (CMSS) technology that jerks the sound out of your headphones' ear cups and into the space around you. The experience is like being perfectly positioned in a room full of speakers. Instead of sound flitting back and forth between the right and left side of your headphones, an ambient field is created, making you feel as if you've been dropped into the game world and bringing an intimacy to the game action you didn't know you were missing. The effect is even more dramatic with music as it pulls rigid stereo mixes out into the world and erases those dead zones you experience when one side of the headphones is silent.

The positional audio even reflects elevation. Perhaps the most dramatic demo we've heard had a helicopter taking off and passing "overhead." As the chopper lifted off, you could hear the clear but subtle cues indicating how high above you it was as it moved throughout the CMSS airspace and eventually came to a landing. Imagine having that kind of realistic audio in a game like *Battlefield 2*—actually, you won't need to imagine it for long, because *BF2* is one of the first games to be optimized for X-Fi. Unfortunately, you won't be able to hear it until the cards start shipping this fall (along with a special bundled version of *UT 2004*, also optimized for X-Fi).

But don't let all this optimization talk discour-

YOUR EARS

ear games

age you, because X-Fi will work with any game, intelligently creating a CMSS environment.

CRYSTAL CLEAR

The 24-bit crystalizer just might be X-Fi's killer app. Let's look at it in terms anybody can understand: Think of a music CD. Digital audio is recorded at 24-bit and then immediately compressed to 16-bit just to slap it on a CD. If you turn that into an MP3, even more compression occurs and more audio information is lost as sharper tones are blunted, punch is deadened, and the overall sound quality is muffled. X-Fi's 24-bit crystalizer restores that lost information and brings music to life on a scale comparable to DVD Audio. X-Fi does this through a crazy kind of reverse math, "backwardizing" the compression algorithms and making logical assumptions to restore and remaster the lost tones, particularly the high-end low-end sounds that are the first victims of compression.

Music fans will love it. Whether we were listening to The Clash's "London Calling," a Philip Glass symphony, a Queen song, or a Police song that I thought had been ruined for me thanks to obsessive playing by a college roommate, the effect was never less than breathtaking, with the music sounding as sharp and as clear as if it were being performed right there.

For gamers, the upside is just as huge. Those same compression losses occur with game audio as well, and restoring them adds a visceral punch you—once again—didn't know you were missing. Listening to a *Jedi Knight* battle with the crystalizer running makes the thrum of lightsabers so rich that you can practically feel the static electricity from the weapons tugging at your arm hair. Listening to that same battle, I involuntarily jerked my head to dodge a blaster shot whipping by me—it sounded just that real.

HEAR FOR YOURSELF

In this case, hearing is believing, so we've included a bunch of X-Fi sample audio files on this month's disc. Without an actual X-Fi card in your rig, you won't get the benefit of the crystalizer, but you can absolutely hear the CMSS tech in action. Be sure to check out the Read Me file and follow the set-up instructions. I betting afterward you'll be like us—eagerly it won't come close to the experience of hear- awaiting the next big technological leap in ing the files running on an X-Fi card, but we're gaming. /Robert Coffey

THE COMPETITION

[redacted] nology, of to its [redacted] ...eas of surround sound—including support for headphones, as with X-Fi. ...ding their moves in the coming headphones/surround sound wars.

The 24-bit crystalizer just might be X-Fi's killer app.

The Entertainment Mode screen is the least complicated screen and should be the most familiar to users since its look mimics a home-theater receiver's. From here, users will be able to set preferences for audio and DVD playback—once these preferences are set, however, odds are most people will just fiddle with that big fat volume knob.

Interested in X-Fi? Want to dig deeper into the guts and bolts of it all? Then check out ExtremeTech.com's excellent in-depth explanation of the hardware on the Web at www.extremetech.com.

MUSIC ON THE MOVE

One of the great [redacted] the super-ripped [redacted] ...ize as regular [redacted] ...ply, effectively [redacted] ...round sound [redacted] ...ne rich feature won't be a part of the super-roped files. But consid- [redacted] ...players, how long do you [redacted] ...o shrink down that PCI card [redacted] ...e asked Phil O'Shaughnessy [redacted] ...munications for Creative, that [redacted] ...his eyes lit up, all it would [redacted] that Creative is committed to X-Fi well into the future.

KILLER RIG

Kandalf Intel-SLI

WE'VE TAKEN INTEL OFF OUR KILLER RIG MIA status now that it's become a charter member of Nvidia's exclusive NForce4 MCP SLI (Scalable Link Interface) club. With the Nvidia NForce4 SLI chipset firmly entrenched in Intel's gaming camp, Intel fans have plenty to be thankful for.

Scanning the guts of our new Kandalf Intel-SLI system, it reads like we're pimping our A-List again. With all DIY setups, the processor forms the basis for system building. Since our focus is an Intel-based SLI configuration, we went right to the top in choosing Intel's Pentium 4 3.73GHz Extreme Edition 1,066MHz FSB core CPU component. Pricey, yes, but it kicks butt. Asus has outdone itself by manufacturing the first Intel SLI motherboard; its new P5ND2-SLI Deluxe offers the same features as its heralded AMD-based A8N-SLI Deluxe board. Adding two Hitachi 7K500 500GB NCQ SATA II HDDs in RAID 0 gives one whopping terabyte of storage. For filling the two PCI Express video slots, we went with the best GeForce GPU cards—a pair of BFGTech GeForce 6800 Ultra OC 256MB GDDR3 cards. Finally, we stuck a couple of Corsair 5400UL 512MB RAM modules running at 667MHz in the memory channels.

The Thermaltake Kandalf full-tower chassis with its toolless design, thermal capacity, and spacious interior is perfect for housing our components. The expansive design makes it easy to work inside, especially when adding a couple of LED fans, a cabling kit, and dual cold cathode ray tubes purchased from www.xoxide.com. Since I've been running into power-supply issues (see sidebar), I chose a PC Power & Cooling Turbo-Cool 510-watt Nvidia-certified SLI power supply for our power needs. This is a serious power supply.

As brawny as this rig is, benchmark testing shows it to be just slightly behind (and sometimes beside) the AMD SLI systems here in the cave. But if you want Intel, it has finally become an alternative for gamers looking for high-performance SLI. **/ Raphael Liberatore**

If you want Intel, it has finally become an alternative for gamers looking for high-performance SLI.

PC POWER & COOLING TURBO-COOL 510 EXPRESS (PSU)

With RAID, SLI, mod lighting, and a heavy assortment of fans, PCs today demand greater and more reliable power supply solutions. PC Power & Cooling's Turbo-Cool 510 Express power supply saves the day. This is one of the first power supplies to actually receive Nvidia SLI certification. PC Power & Cooling builds its PSU from the ground up with quality heavy-duty caps, inductors, and heat sinks, and its Turbo-Cool offers tight, consistent, and reliable +12VDC output at a continuous ambient temperature while maintaining output at full and peak loads with a minimum of sag and surge issues, which can lead to unstable machine

The Guts

	COMPONENT	PRICE
Case	Thermaltake Kandalf aluminum full-tower case with window panel	$[illegible]
Operating System	Microsoft Windows XP Professional x64 Edition	$[illegible]
Power Supply	PC Power & Cooling 510-watt T51SLI power supply	$[illegible]
Processor	Intel Pentium 4 660 3.73GHz processor	$[illegible]
Motherboard	Asus P5ND2-SLI PCI Express Motherboard with 7.1 audio, Gigabit LAN, RAID/Serial ATA	$[illegible]
Memory	Corsair XMS2 5400UL 675MHz 2 x 512 MB DDR memory (1GB total; 2 x $140)	$[illegible]
Hard Drives	Two Hitachi 7K500 500GB 7,200 rpm NCQ SATA II HDD (2 x $225)	$[illegible]
Graphics Processor	Two BFGTech GeForce 6800 Ultra OC 256MB GDDR3 PCI Express graphics cards with TV-out (2 x $510)	$[illegible]
DVD-ROM Drive	LG dual-layer DVD+/-R+/-RW	$[illegible]
Floppy Drive	Sony 1.44MB floppy drive	$[illegible]
Monitor	Dell 2404 24-inch LCD	$[illegible]
Keyboard	Saitek Gamers Keyboard	$[illegible]
Mouse	Logitech Razer Diamondback Optical Mouse	$[illegible]
Speakers	Creative S750 7.1 Speaker System	$[illegible]
TOTAL COST		$5,404

EXTREMETECH

TECH MEDICS

ExtremeTech.com's big brains answer your questions

SINCE I RUN AN ATHLON 64 PROCESSOR, naturally I have been tempted to make the switch to the new XP 64-bit OS. Problem is, I have Windows XP Home now, so making the switch won't be as easy or as affordable as I might like. My biggest question is: Will it enhance my games at all?

Blake Ogle

The short answer is "not yet." Full 64-bit goodness requires four elements: a 64-bit application, a 64-bit OS, 64-bit drivers, and 64-bit hardware. If you ran out tomorrow and got Windows XP Professional x64 Edition and installed 64-bit drivers, you'd have three of the four bases covered. But the all-important fourth base—64-bit games—isn't here yet. There will be some 64-bit games coming out this year, but 64-bit gaming won't go mainstream until 64-bit-capable CPUs are more widely available in lower-priced PCs. Most 32-bit games will run, though—but not games protected with StarForce copy protection (used by some current Ubisoft titles).

StarForce uses a device driver for its content protection, and the company expects to have a 64-bit version ready this summer.

I am planning on building a new system within the next few months. I'm looking for the best videocard to use, but I'm having a hard time choosing the right card. I need to know what videocards are comparable performancewise between AGP and PCI Express and their prices. For example, what PCI Express card would give me similar results to an ATI 9800 XT?

Brett Smith

Transitional periods are always difficult, because the GPU makers invariably don't make every GPU for both the old and new platform. For example, ATI's Radeon X700, a fine midrange GPU, is only available on PCI Express (PCIe). Nvidia's GeForce 6600 GT is available in both AGP and PCIe flavors. If you're making a platform investment at this point (new CPU, motherboard, memory), then go with PCIe. A full-duplex interconnect, PCIe can both send and receive data much faster than AGP could ever hope to. A card based around Nvidia's GeForce 6800 GT on the PCIe side would be a very solid high-midrange solution. If you're on a tighter budget, a card based either on the Radeon X700 or the GeForce 6600 GT will get the job done.

Very few articles have been written concerning big-screen DLP HDTVs and computer gaming. I would like to know if any tests have been performed that compare the quality to traditional CRT displays.

Bob Temple

We test HDTVs on a pretty regular basis at ExtremeTech, and both the PS2 and the Xbox can run in progressive-scan mode and connect to an HDTV via component video output. Your PC can connect via a DVI or VGA output. One issue with DLP-based HDTVs (rear projection) is the vertical viewing angle. We've found that these HDTVs are really best viewed straight on and that color shifting can occur if your viewing position is off-axis. The other issue is that your PC games need to support widescreen resolutions to look their best on an HDTV. This resolution is usually 1280x720, which is known as 720p in the HDTV world, and while nonwidescreen games will play, the HDTV's video scaler may distort the game's image to make it fill your HDTV screen. Also, some games exhibit a tiny delay between when you press the controller and when you see a response, which can be a problem in fast twitch games.

I've seen some online reviews of the new Athlon 64 X2 and Pentium 840 dual-core CPUs, and they can be a lot faster than single-core CPUs. But will they make games any faster?

Melinda Fedders

It depends on the game. Game engines have historically been written as one big, single-threaded event loop, and as a result, they haven't benefited from dual-CPU setups. The dual-core CPUs simply place two CPU cores onto a single die, and an application has to be multithreaded for it to see real benefit from a dual-core CPU. However, most games are still written as single-threaded apps, and until game developers write new engines that are multithreaded, you won't see much benefit from a dual-core CPU on most games. Don't expect to see multithreaded games become common until late 2006.

Full 64-bit goodness requires four elements: a 64-bit application, a 64-bit OS, 64-bit drivers, and 64-bit hardware.

MANUFACTURER: **BFGTech**
PRODUCT: **GeForce 6600 GT**

Got questions? *Send them to Tech_Medics@ziffdavis.com*

TOM vs. BRUCE

PUBLISHER: NCsoft
DEVELOPER: ArenaNet
GENRE: MMORPG

WOW KILLER?

Not quite, but Washington-based developer ArenaNet did record over 250,000 account registrations during *Guild Wars* first week. Yowza!

GUILD WARS

Tom and Bruce vs. John Kenneth Galbraith

TOM: JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH WAS AN economist known for taking complicated principles and delivering them as the sort of homespun aphorisms you might hear on *A Prairie Home Companion*. For instance, there's one about how if you give a horse enough oats, there will be some left over for the sparrows. Something like that. I think it's supposed to explain trickle-down economics. I'm no John Kenneth Galbraith. Here's another one: "Under capitalism, man exploits man. Under communism, it's just the opposite." He's the Winston Churchill of economics.

Today, John Kenneth Galbraith must die.

Bruce: Tom thinks it's really funny to deliberately misread or mishear words. We're playing a mission in *Guild Wars* called Villainy of Galrath. There's some backstory about stopping the villainy of someone named Ga rath, but I'm not about to read a bunch of *Guild Wars* fan fiction, and Tom isn't about to disabuse himself of the fantasy that we're going to kill John Kenneth Galbraith.

At least the John Kenneth Ga.braith stuff is mildly funny. Another of Tom's favorites: He really likes it when I'm talking about my Axe Mastery, an attribute that determines whether I can use certain weapons. Tom loves to pretend I'm saying "Ass Mastery." Here's a typical exchange over Teamspeak

Tom: *Hey, Bruce, I just found a great ax that maybe you can use. What level is your mastery?*

Bruce: *It's still 6, just like last time you asked.*

▲ **Note that we have to fight the undead critters without the added benefit of Tom's bone horrors.**

▲ **Once we start battling things that aren't already dead, the bone horrors join the fray. Take that, forest minotaur!**

Tom: *So you would say you're a level 6 ass master?*

Then there's the sound of muffled laughter. The whole thing will repeat in about 10 minutes

Tom: The quest: Villainy of Galbraith. My companion: a sixth level ass master.

Bruce: The quest takes us through several zones, which Tom and I scouted earlier

Tom: By "scouted," Bruce means we got within sight of the end, a tower where John Kenneth Galbraith lives, and then died Repeatedly. As we accumulated a "death penalty," whereby our health and mana were reduced after we'd been resurrected, it got harder and harder to progress. We eventually took our gloves and went home.

Bruce: Now that we know what we're up against, we can tailor our characters accordingly *Guild Wars* lets you swap out your skills when you're in town, choosing any eight for the duration of a quest. As a warrior/monk, I can choose to go heavy on the healing or load up on melee abilities. In the beginning of Villainy of Galbraith, we'll be fighting undead, which means taking skills that do holy damage Everyone who took medieval physics class knows that holy spells do double damage to undead. After that, though, we face trolls, minotaurs, and human spellcasters, which is where Tom's necromancy comes in.

Tom: Bone horrors are twisted, fleshy abominations that I can raise from a corpse and then keep alive by feeding them from my own health Using this strategy, we have easily rolled through many parts of the world. Given Bruce's predilection for all things World War II, he calls it our

Tom
Last month:
Tom's German regime is laid to waste by a victorious Bruce in *Gary Grigsby's World at War*.

Bruce
Last month:
Bruce's Allied troops succeed in putting an end to Tom's Communist ways.

"bone horror panzer blitz."

But there's one problem: You can't make undead from undead. Ghouls and zombies are an exception. Otherwise, killing an undead dude doesn't leave anything raiseable. Skeleton rangers, fog nightmares, wraiths, necrid horsemen, hellhounds, and so forth can't be recycled. It's a scientific fact—I learned it in medieval physics class. Until we get out of the swamps and start fighting the non-undead things around Kessex Peak, I have to rely on curses that drain health, slow attacks, and lower armor classes. I'll be a boring old support mage while Bruce hogs all the glory of the actual fighting.

Bruce: I "rolled up" a warrior because I like to play melee characters in these types of games. Spellcasters are just a bit too fruity for me, and some of the mesmer outfits are, uh, not really my style. Of course, that implies that a Village People construction worker look-alike—which is what my guy looks like—is my style.

Tom: I, on the other hand, am totally hot, being a scantily clad necromancer chick. I've opted for scar armor that gives me lots of extra spell-casting energy and leaves me mostly nude. I talked Bruce into giving me all his silver dye so I could make my scars all shiny and metallic. I was worried at first that I'd look like some sort of Goth *Tron* character, but I look totally hot.

Bruce: The dual-class system gives you a lot of options without a lot of duplication because of one factor: primary attributes. For example, as a warrior/monk, I have access to the warrior's primary attribute, Strength. That makes a lot of my warrior skills, you know, better. But I'll never have Divine Favor, which is the primary monk attribute, so no matter how many points I put into monk attributes, I'll never be as good at monking as an actual monk. An even bigger, unrelated problem is that I think I want to be a ranger.

Tom: Rangers aren't all that. I'm half ranger, but I just use it for the pet a cat I've been leveling since I got him. At one point, he was even at a higher level than me. He takes up two of the eight skill slots: one for Charm Animal which is needed to bring him along, and the other for Comfort Animal, which is needed to resurrect and heal him when he's been standing in poison swamp water. But he's a great complement to my bone horror army. Because I've named him Hot Dog, after Dennis the Menace's cat, I keep accidentally calling him a dog. "The bastards killed my dog," I'll tell Bruce when my cat gets killed.

Bruce: I still wish I was a ranger, but not because I'd get a dog. Playing as a melee character makes it really hard to heal people. One of the greatest things that *Guild Wars* does (besides outlawing jumping) is introducing collision detection between individual units. This means you can actually use the medieval combat tactics you learned at the RenFaire to protect spellcasters with melee types. The problem is that the pathfinding isn't quite good enough to keep you (or your henchmen) from getting hung up on obstacles. As a warrior, this means I have to be very careful in deciding where to stand, because I have some melee skills that allow me to hit all "adjacent" targets. Getting to a good spot, though, often requires fighting the pathfinding system, which tends to put all the henchmen and Tom's stupid dog in my way. As a ranger, I could just stand back and cycle through targets while healing. Why can't I do that now? Well, I can, but because I'll never have the ranger attribute of Marksmanship, I'll never be very good with a bow.

▲ If there's one thing better than a bone horror, it's five bone horrors.

▲ A girl and her bone horror—now that's something you don't see all the time...unless you're playing *Guild Wars*.

> I talked Bruce into giving me all his silver dye so I could make my scars all shiny and metallic.

Tom: Villainy of Galbraith was one of those quests that I figured would squat in my quest log forever. It's not clear where you're supposed to go. But lucky for me, Bruce is aces when it comes to fantasy geography. Just ask him where any place is in *World of WarCraft*, and before he realizes he's outing himself as a hardcore MMO geek, he's explaining to you exactly how to get there.

Bruce: We start out in this town called Bergen Hot Springs. It wasn't easy to find, although it was the destination for a quest out of Lion's Arch, which is an outpost you'll find about halfway through the game. Once we uncovered this town, it became clear that it would be a good place to use as a base for finding Galbraith. We had uncovered a lot of Northern Kryta without ever finding the "Black Curtain" or "Wizard's Tower" described in the quest's text, so the area west of Bergen Hot Springs seemed like a reasonable choice. We had already explored everything else.

Tom: I have very fond memories of this area, because this is where we did my favorite quest. We had to rescue someone's pig by herding it across the level back to its owner, basically the fantasy equivalent of rescuing a cat from a tree. It made me feel good about helping someone else without having to just kill stuff. Plus, the pig was really cute.

Bruce: I hope we never have to do another pig-herding quest. It was all about stupid A.I. pathfinding, which didn't stop Tom from saying things like, "Bruce, get out of the way, you're scaring the pig!" It took superhuman restraint not to unleash my Axe Mastery on that thing.

Guild Wars is automatically my favorite game ever for one reason, no jumping. Of course, the downside to not having hyperactive kids jumping up and down every time your party stops moving is that you get blocked by things like tree stumps. Nevertheless, I like the twisty, mazelike environments that make exploring kind of like a treasure hunt. Except when you have to avoid poison swamp water.

Tom: It's easy enough for us to stay out of the poison swamp water. One thing that makes us distinctly human and that has continually spoofed Turing tests is that we know better than to walk through poison. The A.I. henchmen aren't hip to

that, so their health bars are constantly turning green and ticking down. They're usually smart enough to get out in time, but it makes for unnerving trips through the Cursed Lands if you can't get a full party of humans who are innately able to not walk through poison.

Only a few of our guild members are online now, but they're doing other things. So we recruit a pickup group, which involves standing around in Bergen Hot Springs and yelling "LFG for Villainy of Galbraith," all the while inviting every monk we can find. Because monks are dedicated healers, they're always in demand. And they know it. Most of them ignore us. It's a sellers' market, like when trying to hit on the prettiest woman in a bar.

We eventually get a pickup group together and set out. They immediately split up, run off in different directions, and start drawing obscene doodles on the minimap. I think one of the doodles is supposed to be either the Eye of Sauron or a woman's privates. At any rate, Bruce and I agree that it's officially The Worst Pickup Group We've Ever Picked Up and we'd rather deal with dragging the A.I. through poison. We head back to town and gather up some henchmen.

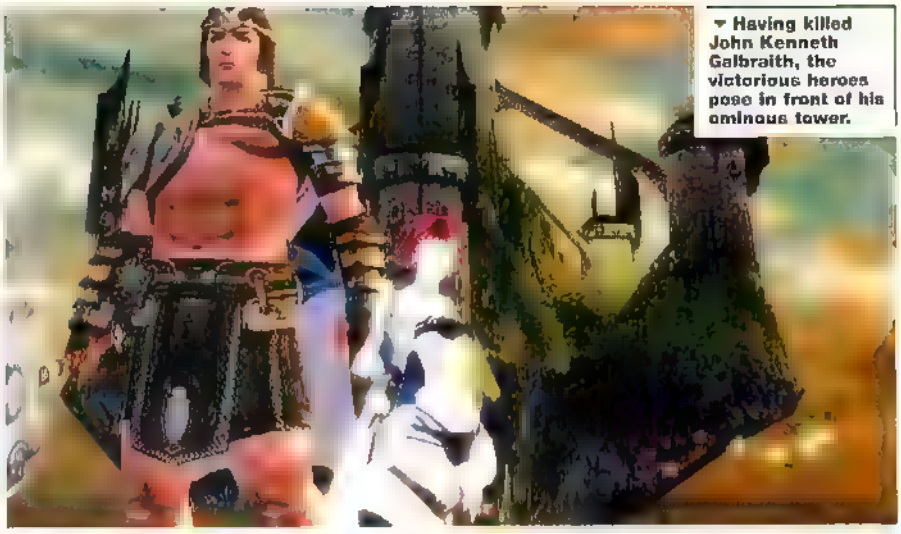
Bruce: It's a short walk through Nebo Terrace to the gateway into the Cursed Lands. The zone is silly with skeletors and mesmers or whatever those guys are called. I have an area-of-effect spell called Symbol of Wrath that, uh, I guess gets God so mad that he does extra damage to zombies. The only question I have is why God isn't mad at zombies all the time, instead of just when I hit the Symbol of Wrath button.

We zone through the portal (which on the map looks like a swastika) into the Cursed Lands, which seems to be exactly like Nebo Terrace, only I guess cursed. Same terrain, same monsters, same strategy

Tom: Bruce is so obsessed with World War II that any swirling icon reminds him of the Third Reich.

Bruce: The Black Curtain! Once we step into this zone, I get the little green quest arrow, which tells us which direction to go. Since Tom and I have been here before, we know it's still a long way to the end of the zone, and a long trek through the next one before we can face off with Harvard faculty necromancers. Until then, there's this thing called swamp water.

Tom: If you didn't get the Harvard faculty reference, don't feel bad. I didn't get it either until I started reading up on our opponent. John Kenneth Galbraith, whose villainy will end soon, taught at Harvard. We eventually get out of the Cursed Lands and emerge into the more pleasant clime of Kessex Peak. We all died a few times, so we've got a bit of a death penalty, but at last I can fulfill my true calling and raise an army of bone horrors to rule the world. Or at least this small corner of it.



▼ Having killed John Kenneth Galbraith, the victorious heroes pose in front of his ominous tower.

They immediately split up, run off in different directions, and start drawing obscene doodles on the minimap.

Bruce: At least we're out of that swamp. Rather than make a beeline for our destination, we go out of our way to beat up on forest minotaurs. This works off some of the death penalty we accumulated in the swamps and lets Tom recruit a bunch of monsters to get in my way.

Tom: It's been a long slog, but we've made it to where we gave up last time through. I can see the tower where John Kenneth Galbraith lives. But this time our death penalty has been managed better. By the way, the cool thing about being a necromancer with an army of bone horrors is that it's in everyone's best interest to keep me alive. Because when I die, all the bone horrors turn hostile. So unless you want to add to your troubles with a pack of undead abominations, you'd better watch my back. Bruce knows this and generally keeps me well healed.

Bruce: This is going to be tricky. There are like 1 million level 20 dudes guarding this tower, and they're human, so they're probably a million times smarter than those minotaurs. We manage to thin their ranks a bit. Unfortunately, they thin our ranks as well. On a few occasions, I'm the only one left standing, which I guess is best since I can resurrect the whole party.

Tom: It looks like it's going to be just like last time; I'm at -60 percent health, which is where the death penalty maxes out. Two swipes from a hill giant and I'm dead, leaving Bruce and company to clean up whatever disgruntled undead I've left lying around. We're starting down that vicious spiral. What's more, my dog keeps getting killed.

▼ Bruce resurrecting Tom, again.

Bruce: Just as we're despairing that there are too many of them, Tom notices that we can sneak up the hill to the right and avoid most of the bad guys entirely. It's almost like a stealth mission. There are a few level 11 bandits in our way. Please. We run straight at the little green star marking the end of the quest and are rewarded by finding some guy who doesn't look anything like an economist. In fact, he looks like a floating gold knight. That goes with the floating castle he lives in, I guess. We kill him pretty easily.

Tom: What Bruce doesn't realize is that after you kill the gold knight, you have to use your imagination for the part where you kneel over his vanquished body and remove his helmet. You reveal a mortally wounded John Kenneth Galbraith, who says with his dying breath, "You may have defeated me, but you'll never get...John... Maynard...Keynes."

If you didn't get that one, don't feel bad. I had to look it up to write it./

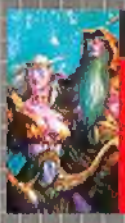
▼ Tom and his trusty dog...er, cat...dead again. Immediately followed by Bruce resurrecting Tom—again. It's a good thing the death penalty caps at 60 percent.

Bruce and Tom each get 500 experience points. And a sense of satisfaction.

ON THE DISC

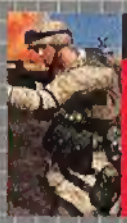
THE LATEST AND GREATEST PC DEMOS

Let the fall games begin! Our big news this month (for the two people who still haven't played it, that is): a free 14-day trial of *World of WarCraft*, our 2004 Game of the Year! And if that's not enough, you can also check out the *Battlefield 2* demo to see what all the hoopla is about or the *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War* demo, which we are offering again to complement this month's *Warhammer* minifeature.



WORLD OF WARCRAFT TRIAL

Unless you have been living under a rock, you've already heard plenty about this amazing game. Good-bye, social life...hello, Azeroth!



BATTLEFIELD 2 DEMO

Everybody's favorite team-based shooter gets all-new graphics and team-play. Go online, then read our review on page 58.

WARHAMMER 40,000: DAWN OF WAR DEMO

The *Winter Assault* expansion's coming, so brush up on *DOW*—and get the skinny on other *Warhammer* games on page 26!

WARHAMMER 40,000: DAWN OF WAR MODS

Lock and load with these mods, including some handy tools that let you create your own world of postapocalyptic high jinks.

CREATIVE X-FI XTREME

Think you've heard your games at their best? Think again. Check out these audio samples of X-Fi technology in action.

WORLD OF WARCRAFT TRAILER

For those of you who actually have been living under a rock and are thus unsure what all the hype is about, watch this trailer to see what awaits you in *World of WarCraft*.

ULTIMATE SPIDER-MAN TRAILER

Spider-Man is back in Ultimate Marvel universe style—and this time, you can also take evil for a spin as the villainous Venom. This trailer will give you an eyeful of Spidey's all-new cel-shaded look.

HITMAN: BLOOD MONEY TRAILER

Agent 47 returns in this fourth installment of the *Hitman* stealth-action series. This trailer shows just a few of the myriad ways to take out your targets.

HELLGATE: LONDON TRAILER

Want to know what some of the *Diablo* guys have been up to? Then check out this visceral trailer set in a near-future, war-torn London.

CALL OF DUTY 2 TRAILER

Adrenaline rush? Check. D-Day? Check. All hell about to break loose? Watch it and weep, then prepare to fight!

COSMIC BUGS

Reflexive offers up another action-packed shareware game filled with great maps and lots of power-ups. But watch out for those cosmic bugs—they'll try to ruin your day!

TELLTALE TEXAS HOLD 'EM

Ever wanted to spend your time playing poker with a bunch of wisecracking oddballs? Consider it done.

"Where the hell is my disc," you ask? Don't miss out! Upgrade your subscription today by calling 800-827-4450.

AD INDEX

2K GAMES **Elder Scrolls Oblivion** 25

2K GAMES **Serious Sam 2** 2-3

2K GAMES **Shattered Union** 41

CHIPS & BITS **Chips and Bits** 61

CREATIVE LABS **Audigy** 9

CYBERPOWER SYSTEMS **Cyberpower PC** 12-13, 49

IBUYPOWER **Ibuypower PC** 29, 74-75

MAJESCO GAMES **Advent Rising** 37

MICROSOFT **Dungeon Siege II** 4-5

MICROSOFT **Windows XP** 19

NCSOFT CORP . . . . . Back Cover

NINTENDO OF AMERICA **Fire Emblem** 11

PLANETWIDE GAMES **RYL: Path of the Emperor** 21

VIVENDI UNIVERSAL GAMES **F.E.A.R** 1a-d

VIVENDI UNIVERSAL GAMES **WORLD OF WARCRAFT** . . . . . demo

CREATIVELY BANKRUPT

Panning for gold in a chemical toilet

THE NEXT TIME YOU'RE BRAGGING TO YOUR nongamer friends that games are as big a business as the movies, do yourself and the gaming population a favor and shove both fists in your mouth. Keep them there until you shut the hell up about the movies, and if that means you end up flossing slivers of thumb skin out of your molars for a week, well, at least you're getting some good protein in your diet. Hollywood and the Hollywood mode of thinking are absolutely the worst thing to happen to gaming since ever. Is it a coincidence that the worst PC game of all time is the *Jurassic Park* tie-in *Trespasser*?

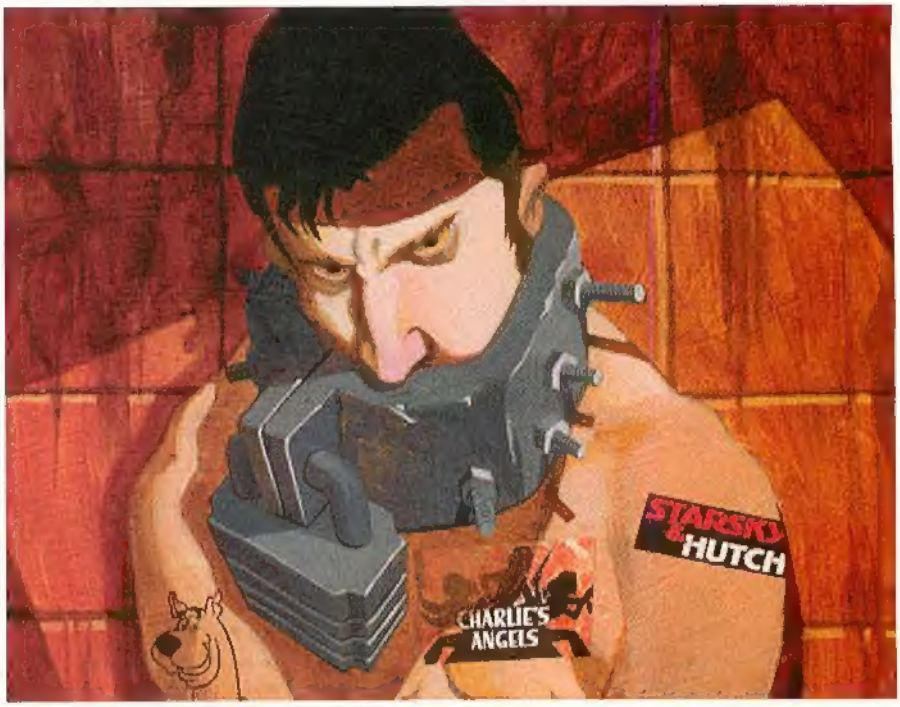


ILLUSTRATION BY JACK BAUKNIGHT

Here's a bunch of announced games: *The Godfather*, *Jaws Unleashed*, *Scarface*, *Dirty Harry*, *The Warriors*, *The Matrix: Path of Neo*, *Starship Troopers*, and *Reservoir Dogs*. And *Taxi Driver*, or as I like to refer to it in family-publication-safe *West Side Story*-speak, *Taxi Motherloving Driver*. These aren't all announced for the PC, but you can bet that many of the ones that aren't will be soon enough. And I shall weep hot tears of blood when they are. Because pretty much every single one of these has no business existing, a lot like the *Starsky & Hutch* game, and *Die Hard: Nakatomi Plaza*, and *Enter the Matrix*, and *The Matrix Online*. These are lazy, cynical, pointless, soulless exercises in avarice and are expelled from the same polluted womb as the *Scooby-Doo*, *Beverly Hillbillies*, *Brady Bunch*, *Charlie's Angels*, and (shudder) *Dallas* movies. Aside from that, yeah, I guess they're OK.

> I want a *Godfather* game about as much as I want a Vicks VapoRub enema, which, most days, is not all that much.

Incredibly, these games are doubly lazy—more than one of them is being pitched as featuring *Grand Theft Auto*-style gameplay. So that makes at least two wads of brainmeat not being taxed with the effort to squeeze out something original. Hey, Vivendi, while you're at it, why not recycle the graphics from *Tribes: Vengeance* for *Scarface* and spare yet another sliver of intellect the indignity of actual use? I saw *Scarface* at E3 this year, and how those guys are not going to have their pants sued off and then lit on fire by the *GTA: Vice City* crew is simply beyond me.

Granted, not all of this stuff is based on crap like *Starsky & Hutch*. *The Godfather* is a cinematic masterpiece—so the best this game can possibly hope for is not to totally take a hot whiz all over a beloved classic. When "Not Pissing on Genius" is the bar you're trying to clear, isn't it time to stop competing? I want a *Godfather* game about as much as I want a Vicks VapoRub enema, which, most days, is not all that much. Is the *Godfather* game going to be like the movie? No. You know what is like the movie? The movie. That's why they made it. Games like this will enhance your enjoyment of the beloved original about as effectively as that god-awful green *Shrek 2* cereal enhanced your enjoyment of *Shrek 2*.

I admit I'm being harsh, but this cash-in mentality is killing games, and not just by drowning them in the digital diarrhea of licensed trash: It's killing the originality and creativity that made this hobby and this industry so great. At this year's E3, more than one big-name, very successful developer bemoaned the state of an industry they once loved. Their complaint? They aren't allowed to take risks. Ballooning development budgets (another Hollywood "achievement") prevent them from creating anything new and exciting, lest risk-averse publishers drop them. Instead, they are tasked with developing and maintaining brands first, awesome games second. God forbid they dare tinker with formulas and surprise players with compelling new content—instead they must settle for incremental change, which is just two letters short of being excremental change. It's the same alleged thinking behind the redundant *Lethal Weapon*, *Die Hard*, and *Alien* series of movies. Some of these games may eventually not totally suck—I saw *The Godfather* at E3 and was mildly entertained. But I still have my doubts—when the guy giving the demo says, "We decided to really focus on gameplay," as if this is some "Eureka!" moment of creative genius, I start to worry, because that's right up there with saying, "I decided to really focus on not choking to death" when discussing eating lunch. Shouldn't that be pretty much a given?

But you know who else is creatively bankrupt? You are, but only if you reserve your gaming budget for *Scarface* because "that movie was so badass" and you pass over *Psychonauts* or *Freedom Force*. Do that and you're telling publishers, "I find new things terrifying and strange—please do not challenge me."

I want something new and exciting. What do you want?

/ **Robert Coffey** robert_coffey@ziffdavis.com

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